The Contemporary Conservative

VIKING

Original from

In Heaven there'll be no algebra
No learning names or dates
But only playing golden harps
And reading Henry James

Anonymous

DHIREN BHAGAT

The Contemporary Conservative

Selected Writings

Edited with an introduction by
Salman Khurshid

Foreword by Vinod Mehta

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Remembering Dhiren

The year is 1981. I have just launched the *Sunday Observer* (India's first Sunday paper) and am harassed by teething problems. One Saturday—press day at the *Observer*—a young, earnest-looking man wearing a smart *kurta-pyjama* and John Lennon type glasses breezes into my dingy office with a 'proposal'. For some mysterious reason I don't throw him out but listen to what he has to say. He tells me that he is a poet and is poised to produce a poetry magazine. Would I distribute it free with the *Sunday Observer*?

At twenty-four, Dhiren Bhagat was brimming with ideas. But as I spoke to him on that first meeting I quickly realized that while the budding publisher had thought out the magazine editorially, financially his project was much less secure. Of course, there were tons of friends who had promised they would chip in, but no one had yet coughed up any money. I told him of my misgivings. He shared them. However, he said, apropos of nothing, that he had many other ideas for my consideration. And in ten minutes flat proceeded to give me suggestions for half-a-dozen new magazines as well as advice on how to improve the one currently under my charge.

I could have taken umbrage at this gratuitous guidance. Indeed, a lot of people found Dhiren arrogant and altogether too sure of himself. Perhaps I would have too, had I not been struck by the quality of his advice. He had obviously read the paper carefully; all his suggestions were eminently sensible. He had spotted many weaknesses too. He was definitely worth listening to.

We agreed to meet again. When we did, I learned that Dhiren had recently returned to India after three years at Oxford, and was unsure of what he wanted to do. In this uncertainty he was typical of his generation. He was a self-confessed conservative, but beyond this knowledge, he was groping in the hope that back home he would somehow 'find his way'. Doubtless, he was gifted, but in 1981 brilliance and vagueness were bestowed upon him in equal measure.

He wanted to be a writer. But was he going to be a poet? Or was he going to rent a cottage in Mussoorie (which he eventually did) and write scintillating novels and meaningful biographies? Or was he going to get embroiled in the hurly-burly of Indian public life and become a journalist? The dilemma was agonizing for him. While journalism was exciting and gave him a spurious sense of involvement, Dhiren saw it as essentially ephemeral—something that had a life of anything from two hours to two days after which it became the property of the *moomphaliwala*. Poetry, yes, he'd already written some, but could he make a living (even if it was strictly vegetarian) rhyming words? Novels and biographies offered serious intellectual and artistic discipline, but at twenty-four was he prepared to lock himself away for five years at a stretch, emerging periodically with a *tome*?

In the end, Dhiren chose the easy way out. He became all three! He was forever rushing off to Trivandrum or Namibia to do a story, but on the flight out he would be scribbling verse or making notes on the novel he was planning in his mind. It should come as no surprise then, that in a brief writing career of seven years he had written short stories, poems, a volume on epigrams (to be published by Pan in England this year), had done a good deal of work on a book on Punjab, had edited and compiled the best of the *Sunday Observer* (which, alas, never saw the light of day) all in addition to his journalistic output. He was nothing if not prolific.

Dhiren was eager to announce to the world that he had arrived and it had better take notice of him. It was not envy that made him say of famous editors and pundits, 'Look at the rubbish that fool is writing', but disgust for mediocrity wherever he saw it. And he would enthusiastically take on the job of exposing print panjandrums.

To most people he was not immediately endearing. They thought he was affected, snobbish, and pretentious. Most of all they thought he was yet another Oxford-returned, spoiled, young brat out to sensationalize and shock his way onto centre-stage.

There is some truth in all these accusations. But who amongst us can deny that at twenty-five or twenty-six, when we were making our first forays into the profession, we too didn't have similar ambitions and use similar tactics? Dhiren, however, never took cheap shots. When he attacked Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, or declared that Arun Shourie couldn't write intelligible English, or hinted that Khushwant Singh's self-confessed libido was largely a figment of his own imagination, he was really articulating fairly widely-held opinions that didn't get expressed in print for want of guts.

Dhiren's journalistic life began as a column-writer. And his first columns appeared in the *Sunday Observer*. They were an instant hit. His prose was witty, elegant, thoughtful and always provocative. He seemed to be following the policy of the present London *Times* editor, Simon Jenkins. Jenkins holds that a successful columnist must find out the conventional wisdom on the subject he has decided to write on and argue against it. Not surprisingly, a Dhiren Bhagat column was never boring and very frequently in the *Sunday Observer* the leader would take one position and my friend Dhiren would take a diametrically opposite view right next to it. This dichotomy added much to the gaiety of our edit page.

Dhiren liked to work at such a frenetic pace that he soon found column-writing a rather sedentary occupation. He came up with the idea himself: would I make him a sort of roving correspondent? I agreed immediately. Thus emerged Dhiren Bhagat the reporter-writer, an *avatar* in which he acquired deserved fame. And he was everywhere—with Rajiv Gandhi as he brought down the house at the Washington Press Club, with Mani Shankar Aiyar pontificating on the lofty aims of Apna Utsav, with Devi Lal annihilating the Congress in Haryana—travelling with gusto and recording with rare insight nuances other reporters tended to miss.

Dhiren hated chasing 'scoops', for him interpretation, context and colour were more important than fact, however exclusive. Yet, he managed to land three, all of which captured national headlines and infuriated one political party or another. He established with documentary evidence that S. Mulgaokar, former editor-in-chief of the *Indian Express*, had corrected Zail Singh's famous letter to Rajiv. The then opposition showered opprobrium on him while R.K. Karanjia hailed him as the new messiah. A few months later he reported from Colombo that the Rajiv government had paid the LTTE a vast sum of money to sign the peace accord. The opposition garlanded him while R.K. Karanjia called him a traitor. Finally he revealed the arrival of clandestine arms from Kabul at Delhi airport courtesy RAW, presumably to be distributed to government-sponsored terrorists in Punjab. This time everyone jumped on him and he was labelled a CIA agent by the Congress. Since the report appeared in the *Indian Post*, of which I was the editor, I too was labelled a CIA agent by the then I&B minister K.K. Tewary with one additional honour: I was also working for Mossad.

Despite his manifest intellectual skills, Dhiren never cut corners. He was one of the most diligent journalists I have ever known. He would spend an entire day at the Asiatic Library checking a date or a quote. He would withhold a 'hot' story for three or four days because he wasn't certain of a politician's initials. The manuscript had to be error-free.

And he was punctilious about his copy. Semi-colons, apostrophes and dashes obsessed him. They had to be in their proper place. The number of times I have seen Dhiren poring over proofs of his articles are too numerous to recount. I would urge him to leave it to the proof-readers and subs, but he would always be back re-reading the proof-read copy. One of the reasons he was partial to me as an editor was because I edited his copy, especially his columns, with a surgeon's scalpel rather than a butcher's knife. I respected and admired his attention to detail.

The professional loss, not only for me but for all of us who work as journalists and take pride in our work, is obviously immense. However, for me the loss is also personal. An inflexible teetotaller, Dhiren would hold forth at parties swirling a glass of fizzy fresh lime soda as if it were champagne. An evening with him whether in London or in Delhi or in the Sea Lounge in Bombay was always memorable. He loved to meet people, he loved slightly risqué gossip, he loved cocktail parties where he was always ready to get into a scrap (promptly forgotten the next morning), he loved the company of pretty women with lively minds, he loved intellectual disputation, he loved to laugh. Wherever he went he brought merriment, excitement, wit, camaraderie, the joy of being alive. I miss him greatly.

Bombay *Vinod Mehta*
August, 1990

Introduction

Dhiren Bhagat was always full of plans. When I first met him at an Indian Society function at Oxford in 1977 he came dressed in a brown *achkan*. He was still waiting to hear from Hertford College about his admission but he was confident that he would come up to Oxford for his undergraduate degree. Dhiren believed he was made for Oxford and vice versa. He lived that belief to the last day of his life, despite having reluctantly submerged himself in the murky waters of Indian journalism.

When Dhiren died, he was, as usual, busy planning. 'The Shanty', up at Sisters' Bazar in Mussoorie was almost ready for his spartan marathon, to meet the constantly postponed deadline for the Punjab book Dhiren was writing for Penguin India. Two small agricultural plots across the river Jamuna from Delhi were to be his nearest station to the city as well as an assurance for his yet-to-be-born children to be educated at Oxford. Then of course there was the definitive novel, many years into gestation, which he promised himself while still up at Oxford. I suspect he felt a little cheated that Salman Rushdie should have occupied centrestage so easily. But at the same time he was not a bit daunted at the prospect of taking on a contemporary literary superstar.

Dhiren Bhagat's favourite pastime was iconoclasm, be it literary or political. If only he had lived longer he would have been a major terror for people who like to see their words in print. But very few people know that even his iconoclasm was a carefully studied one with a respectable, intellectual pedigree. Dhiren called himself a true conservative and never tired of proclaiming the great virtues of conservatism. He derived his ideology of conservatism from a curious amalgam of Hindu thought and the works of European philosophers.Most of our meetings—and we met almost every day during the last two years of his life—invariably involved a spirited exchange on conservatism, till one day he said with an enigmatic smile, 'Your liberalism, Salman, is indeed the purest form of conservatism.'

Dhiren did make an extraordinary effort to live by the principles he extracted from conservative philosophy. He became a vegetarian very early. He refused to drink tea or coffee, although he did make a concession for cola drinks during the months we both became obsessed with playing squash. He had cloth straps stitched for his wrist-watch but had not figured out an appropriate alternative for Oxford leather shoes. He never used hot water for his bath, even in the freezing cold of Mussoorie. Upon his death one friend's tribute described him very aptly as a 'young fogy'.

Unless you remain at university all your life, people like Dhiren are very difficult to find and keep as friends. He became for me a pleasant link with my past and a constant and very convenient source of information about all that was novel and enigmatic in our world. Dhiren loved to talk and he still had a lot to say when he died.

It was inevitable that someone should decide to publish a selection of Dhiren Bhagat's writings. The quality of his written word, as indeed the popularity he acquired as a writer in a short time, are reason enough to produce this volume. But more than that, the volume will become a remarkable collage of the eventful years during which Dhiren Bhagat charmed us—in Oxford, Bombay and Delhi. That Penguin should have asked me to undertake this task of selecting and editing his best pieces is perhaps my good fortune. Many of the stories reproduced here begin with stray bits of information gathered at the coffee tables of the Machan at the Taj in Delhi, which he and I frequented together. Three times Dhiren actually wrote about me or about an argument we had had. On one occasion he almost got me in trouble with the Congress party leadership of the day. But he promptly made up by regaling me with the most hilarious anecdotes about his travels through Punjab and Pakistan. If ever someone saw the acceptable face of violence and terrorism it was Dhiren Bhagat.

Dhiren was a prolific writer and often wrote for several papers on the same subject. That did make the task of making a selection somewhat difficult. For the same reason it was difficult to place his pieces in separate sections to allow the new reader to discern the themes his old readers were more familiar with. I have tried, therefore, to put his Punjab stories chronologically in one section to give a clear picture of the unhappy developments there as well as Dhiren's growing perception of the trauma of his home state. The reporter and the editor fascinated Dhiren, so there is a separate section on the media. Deeply involved as he was in the theme, it must not be forgotten that journalism was only filling the gap till he got down to his novel. His friends often pulled his leg about the farewell to journalism he wrote for the *Indian Express* barely a year after he wrote his first piece. But then Dhiren was not one to take farewells seriously. Not even the final one he drove to in his

Suzuki Gypsy on 24 November 1988, classical music blaring from the car stereo.

New Delhi *Salman Khurshid*
August, 1990

I, Me, Myself

Few Indian journalists have consciously endeavoured to articulate an intellectual posture from which they consistently approach their work. This indeed is what gave Dhiren's writings a character apart. His constant effort to refine his ideological position made him an energetic writer. In a milieu where conservatism is common but its exposition equally uncommon, Dhiren Bhagat sought to give the philosophy of conservatism a respectable place. His heart did not really lie in journalism. He tried to say goodbye to newspapers several times in order to concentrate on the novel he had promised himself when still at university.

Why I am a Conservative

It is unfashionable to be a conservative. Virtually everyone writing in the Indian press today serves up some sort of liberal or leftist gobbledegook. Given the intellectual vitality and originality of our 'senior' journalists this is hardly surprising. These men were fed on these ideologies in the forties and fifties when their minds could still be described as open. Having chewed the clichéd cud for over two decades all they can do now is to serve it to the reader the way he likes it best—predigested. But if the new experiments in the press—the *Telegraph* and the *Observer* prime among them—are to make a contribution to freshening popular ideas they will have to begin by examining unfamiliar perspectives. And a revaluation of conservatism will come pretty high on the list.

When I say I am a conservative (as opposed to a Conservative) I make no claims to sharing a political position with Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher is a radical, a radical of the right, indeed it would not be wrong to call her a reactionary. She is a radical because she believes society must be changed from the root: she is a reactionary because she believes this change consists in going back. Victorian England—despite all its ugliness, cruelty, poverty and injustice—has become a sort of model for her and ignoring the irreversible course of history Thatcher has committed her government to restoring its lost conditions: low taxation, thrift as a virtue (encouraged by high interest rates), mothers to stay at home (encouraged by tax incentives). It is a futile attempt and an unwise one as well.

My conservatism is something else altogether. It is not a matter of a fixed set of particular principles, nor for that matter does it seek to recreate certain predetermined conditions. It is more a way of looking at things than a precise prescription.

Perhaps the central difference between conservatism and its alternatives on the intellectual market lies in the conservative belief that questions of politics cannot be solved without reference to the particular history of the people concerned. Purely rational solutions which are 'international' (e.g., systems such as parliamentary democracy, etc.) are useless to the conservative unless they make sense in that particular region historically. One-man-one-vote-first-past-the-post parliamentary representation was the outcome of at least seven hundred years of English history: to transplant it to, say, Ghana, because it is the 'rational' thing to do by the liberal book, is pure foolishness. For the conservative the organic nature of society must be studied before change is contemplated: if the proposed change violates the organism of local institutions it is not a wise change, and cannot have the desired effect.

Put differently, what is possible must shape our image of what is desirable. Many liberals see this as particularly pernicious, a compromise of ideals. There is something to the charge. Conservatives are not utopians, when it comes to politics they have no faith in the pie in the sky. Because they believe (with experience behind them) that utopias never come about, they are rightly sceptical of impossible ideals. Instead they concentrate on what is possible, trying in the while to do their best to ensure justice and freedom from poverty by remedying the existing scheme of things.

A knowledge of what is possible comes from a knowledge of history. Whereas the purely rational solution sounds wonderful on paper it is a deep knowledge of actual conditions that can make a measure effective. For instance, it is not enough to keep on railing about corruption and the lack of conscience in the hope that a spiritual transformation will awaken the entire country.

Such spiritual transformations can at best change a small fraction of the population. To improve matters nationally it is more profitable to examine the sociology of corruption, to see why men become corrupt despite an initial reluctance to do so, to make it possible for more men to remain 'honest'. A 'socialist' administrative service and a parliamentary democracy that works in England are unlikely to work efficiently in India: it is the naïvete of liberals to assume that mere wishing will be enough to make the transplantations succeed.

What comes from this way of looking at things is a cautious attitude to change. It is not the conservative attitude that *all* change is undesirable but rather that *most* proposed changes are because they will not work in the way they are intended to. Wisdom is not to be found in the isolated theoretical speculations of thinkers but in the historically accumulated social experience of the community as a whole. This experience expresses itself in terms of customs and traditions which should be respected unless they are patently unjust and so, unworkable.

And when changes are to be effected (for custom is often unjust) they should not be effected through short sharp breaks like revolutions, for revolutions strike at the organic continuity of society. Once this is hit much that is precious in civilization—for rich and poor alike—will be destroyed.

Likewise in the attitude to elites. It is a condition of human society that it is invariably governed by elites—show me a country that isn't and I'll give you a complete set of Burke. Respecting this knowledge, it is worthwhile to work for a better ruling elite, perhaps one that regenerates itself continually with injections from the working classes, but nowhere in the theoretical speculations of the leftists is there any place for such commonsense.

All this is very general you may say and you would be right. Some theorists have gone as far as claiming that conservatism, so conceived, is not an ideology at all, but rather a way of seeing things, an attitude not a theory. Perhaps this is why conservatives rarely have glib answers but instead provide a more detailed appreciation of the problem at hand.

I can speak for myself. Unlike almost every other commentator in the business I do not peddle answers. I have never been so foolish as to offer a grand solution to the country's problems in nine hundred words. What is more, I confess I cannot offer one, even in ninety thousand words.

What I can offer is a perspective and a preference. Both may help in the attempt to achieve a clearer picture of the problems—equally, they may not. It is not my job to offer a substitute to thought, but rather an invitation to thought.

The perspective is the way of looking at things, it is conservative certainly, but not rigidly so. Relevant facts and lucid arguments can dislodge it, or more likely, modify it. The preference too is conservative: it is a preference for a historical approach to particular problems.

I am glad that people write in to the *Observer* on reading my column; I would be gladder though if they reasoned with me. Abuse cuts no ice. If a reader finds me prejudiced on a particular point let him prove it. If he finds fault with my reasoning let him demonstrate the flaw. Deliberately misunderstanding my pieces and then arguing with a caricature Bhagat may make for excellent polemics but intellectually it is so much hot air.

In a rare display of humour (most readers' letters are deadly earnest) a reader once hailed me as one of the finest minds of the thirteenth century. But even that was a bare assertion. All I can say is: less assertions please, more arguments. What *is* so dreadful about my conservatism?

The Sunday Observer
3 July, 1983

Farewell to the Fourth Estate

Some time during my second year at university, I came across Sir Walter Scott's admonition to Lockhart which I promptly copied out in as legible a hand as I could muster and pinned on the board above my mantelpiece: 'Your connection with any newspaper would be a disgrace and a degradation. I would rather sell gin to poor people and poison them that way.' Scott had written that in 1829, exactly a hundred and fifty years before I read it, and though the world has changed somewhat since his day, I felt pretty certain that the nature of poison hadn't.

It is not my practice to copy out mottoes and pin them above the mantelpiece but in this case, I made an exception because a few of my extremely intelligent friends had begun to announce their intention to enter the big bad world and become journalists, and I was greatly troubled. In the event, none of these friends read the note, and even if they did, the warning seems to have been lost on them, for today they are all journalists.

More to the point, I, too, became a journalist, and that within a year of having gone down. It would be incorrect to describe myself as a reluctant journalist (reluctance has never been one of my qualities) but all the same, I did become a journalist by mistake. I repeat: it was never my intention to become a journalist. And yet, I fell. In the past eighteen months, I have written over hundred pieces and, as the cliché goes, enjoyed every minute of it. But now the time has come to throw in the towel and do something else.

Let me explain: Scott's sharp line about how he would rather poison the people by selling them gin was not an isolated remark in the context of my education. Everyone I had read and spoken to had warned me against journalism in much the same way as they had warned me against academic life. Here was Leonard Woolf in the third volume of his autobiography: 'The temptation in journalism is terrific for the young man or woman who has to earn a living and yet wants to be, and perhaps might be, a serious writer. "I will earn my living in Fleet Street," they think, "and write my masterpiece in the evenings and at weekends." But newspaper offices are paved with unwritten masterpieces. If you want to write a masterpiece in the evening, the last thing you should do during the day is to write journalism or indeed, to have anything to do with writing.'

Then there was Cyril Connolly. Appalled by the ephemeral nature of modern civilization and presumably worried that his own talent had not paid off, Connolly set about, in the thirties, to inquire 'into the problem of how to write a book which lasts ten years'. Needless to say, his enquiry, a book called *Enemies of Promise*, survived for more than ten years. In it, Connolly identified several 'enemies': politics, conversation, drink, domesticity, worldly success and, yes, journalism.

'Journalism,' Connolly maintained, 'must obtain its full impact on the first reading, while literature can obtain its effect on a second, being intended for an interested and not an indifferent public. Consequently, the main difference between them is one of texture. Journalism is loose, intimate, simple and striking; literature, formal and compact, not simple and not immediately striking in its effects. Carelessness is not fatal to journalism, nor are clichés, for the eye rests lightly on them. But what is intended to be read once can seldom be read more than once.'

But journalism had a more insidious nature than just being ephemeral. 'A writer who takes up journalism,' Connolly went on, 'abandons the slow tempo of literature for a faster one and the change will do him harm. By degrees, the flippancy of journalism will become a habit and the pleasure of being paid on the nail, and more especially, of being praised on the nail, grow indispensable.'

In the past eighteen months, my experience has confirmed every gloomy sentence of both Connolly and Woolf. In that period, I have not written a single poem or short story. And it isn't just a matter of writing in a different tempo, it is a matter of living at a different tempo and, more important, of inhabiting a world in which everything is far too fast for sanity. To give an example, before I unwittingly became a journalist, I did not read a daily paper. Indeed, though I read more than most people, I did not read much journalism.

But when I began to write regular journalism, this had to change. All journalists, if they are to be successful, must live in the world journalism creates. So I subscribed to several newspapers and regularly read at least ten Indian magazines in addition to half a dozen English and American ones. And soon, I found myself monitoring the newspapers for a monthly column on the press which I had taken to writing. As any old hand in journalism will confirm, this is an extremely useful practice. But it is also one which debilitates the mind.

On New Year's day, Iqbal Masud writing in these columns, called media hype the opiate of the masses. It was a wonderfully self-reflexive remark, cliché trying to expose cliché, hype trying to drive out hype in a process of self-exorcize. My piece is in the same tradition. But what Masud did not emphasize clearly enough was that hype is not just the opiate of the masses, it is equally the opiate of journalists. Masud quoted someone from the *Guardian* approvingly: 'In an atmosphere hysterical with hype, the press becomes not a reporter of the news, or a commentator on it, but a manufacturer and a merchandiser of it.' I agree entirely and wish more people in the press would reflect on what manufacturing and merchandising news does to the mind of the journalist.

Here is Leonard Woolf on the subject: 'It creates a kaleidoscopic, chaotic, perpetual motion rhythm of the mind. As soon as you have produced one number of your paper, you have to begin thinking of and planning the next. Your mind gets into the habit of opening and shutting at regular intervals of twenty-four hours or seven days, like the shells of a mussel or the shutter of a camera, and everything in your mind—and indeed, in your life—gets to be determined and conditioned by this interval. You become a shell fish or a camera, but, unlike them you soon delude yourself into thinking that the opening and shutting of your mind and the contents of the mollusc or camera are of immense importance.'

Writing, as I have been, an average of six pieces a month for the past year and a half, I can recognize these symptoms as clearly as I can see my big toe. My last pieces have been handed in to the editors of various publications. And so it is time to cry off and find a living elsewhere, to attempt to write something that may just last ten years. At any rate, write something that clarifies and compresses rather than excites. In the process, I may recover my sanity. And I should recover quite a bit of money when I go to the *raddiwalla* next Sunday with the piles of newsprint that have accumulated in my room these past eighteen months, in the hope of selling them at rupees three a kilo, which is a little more than the price of peas in winter.

Indian Express

The Press

The years during which Dhiren chased news stories in Delhi, Bombay and elsewhere were also the years in which the Indian press, lead by the *Indian Express* and its enigmatic editor Arun Shourie, campaigned vigorously against the government of the day. There was a serious debate in the country between people who believed that the press was taking an undue advantage of its position and persons who believed that when all else had failed only the press had preserved democracy. Dhiren had very strong views on the media and its impermissible incursion into the field of political activism. But once and only once was he tempted to become an activist—to break the barrier of 'national interest'—when he startled his readers with the story of Afghan weapons being smuggled into the country. He lobbied editors and parliamentarians with some success. The obit. on Khushwant Singh, India's leading satirist, who is still alive and biting, gave Dhiren hours of joy for months.

Why Shourie Can't Think Straight

Given his recent martyrdom it may appear petty to criticize Shourie's prose style. By way of justification then. Were Shourie yet another journalist with yet another journalist's motives that terrible prose would invite little attention. I, for one, wouldn't waste my time on it. But Shourie is marked by his motives.

Shourie's work is often praised as insurgency journalism but on the principle that it is safe to take an honest man at his word I don't believe that mere insurgency is his motive. 'Why write at all?' he asks in one of his collections, only to reply: 'The importance of affirming the truth even when one is totally ineffective in loosening the vice is all the greater the darker the times.' It is here Shourie's naïveté begins. Affirming the truth is a later business: formulating it is difficult enough and with language used as crudely as it is by Shourie I should imagine it is impossible.

Prose and thought are closely linked and good thought cannot exist in bad prose. Orwell was clear about this and I quote Orwell for a tactical reason: though both dead and foreign he is an important intellectual ancestor of much of the PUCL following Shourie commands. The English language, Orwell wrote, 'becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. . . Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits. . . If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think more clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.'

Perhaps the most dangerous fault in Shourie's prose is the pseudo-scientific vocabulary he liberally uses which has the effect of dressing a dubious proposition to appear authoritative. Pretentious diction was a fault Orwell particularly railed against and I wonder what he would make of this specimen: 'Similarly in the first flush it is the potentiality of the new tool that registers itself on the collective psyche—the first thing that registers on peoples minds upon the introduction of elections is that they can throw out bad governments.' Even Shourie obviously felt the first part of the sentence turgid and so proceeded to spell his meaning in plainer words. Expressed thus it is by no means an evident proposition but the pseudo-scientific statement of the general case that precedes it lulls Shourie into believing it *is* true.

Another careless feature of Shourie's style is the frequent abstraction of types from individuals. *A Bhajan Lal, a few C.F. Andrews, a few Chou en Lais, the Gundu Raos, an Antulay.* To use Shourie's *takiya-kalaam,* the examples can be multiplied. Now a man who reduces to types nearly half the human beings he speaks of can at best be said to possess a partial vision. No doubt his training in the social sciences has left Shourie this penchant for types but the rigour the sciences pretend to is absent in his writing. (Note, writing, not documentation.) Instead we are left with a bland reductive vision which refuses to examine analytically or empirically the types it advances.

Such intellectual slovenliness has been noticed by Shourie's admirers as well. Not too long ago Iqbal Masud spoke critically of his hero who 'uses "Sultan" and "Begum" about the Antulays, who takes a swipe at Muslim orthodoxy while writing about the Sikhs, because he knows it will appeal to the majority of his readers'. Masud here alleged dishonesty: with the respect I have for Shourie's integrity I prefer to think of it as muddled thinking induced by a slapdash style uncritical of its own excesses. Journalism is known for its violent logic (and often the more entertaining the more violent) but with prose as cavalier as Shourie's it is difficult to see how anyone can intelligently claim to be aspiring for the complexities of truth.

Power and violence are often confused. So it is not surprising that many whose reading is confined to the daily newspaper feel that Shourie has a powerful style. What Shourie has is a bag of tricks that make his prose more powerful than Girilal Jain's if only because it is that much more violent. Here is a sequence from Shourie's hatchet job on Bhagwati which displays three such tricks:

> 'How does Justice Bhagwati deal with all these facts?'
> 'He doesn't deal with them at all! Each one of the facts that blew Prakash Narain's letter of May 7 to bits was placed. . .'

First the shrill question, a rhetorical device with which Shourie hectors the reader. Then the heavy exclamation mark (Shourie has taken off by now) followed by a violent, clichéd metaphor (*blow to bits*).

Most of Shourie's violence is a tired violence. In Shourie's rusty prose judges sing *paeans to liberty,* Bhagwati misrepresents passages from Ambedkar *to boot,* rulers perform *venal acts,* opportunism is always *crass,* threats *loom,* sequences are *sordid,* progress is *all round,* and the *hour of peril* is upon us. If rust could fight rot Shourie would have solved all the national problems during his stint at the *Express*.

His metaphors are no livelier. *The first flush of realization, hallmark, milk the system, bring the house down.* Shourie begins a didactic piece in the *Economic and Political Weekly*: 'We still have a few more fathoms to go before we touch rock bottom.' A few sentences later, 'There are thus no breakwaters left.' Clearly Shourie doesn't know what he's talking about. If Shourie really wants an aqueous metaphor I suggest he pull the flush and let the water flow through his muddled brain.

Of his sense of humour the less said the better. Towards the end of his star performance, 'Indira Gandhi as Commerce', Shourie wittily informed us: '*You ain't heard nothin' yet buddy.*' Perhaps we haven't, but if that is the corny language in which the new voice of Indian journalism is going to express itself, thank God too.

The Sunday Observer
12 December, 1982

Khushwant: RIP

I was saddened to read that Khushwant Singh passed away in his sleep last week. What a quiet end for so loud a man. How the gods mock the mocking.

Contradictions surrounded Khushwant at every stage of his life. He strove to give the impression that he was a drunken slob yet he was one of the most hard-working and punctual men I knew. He professed agnosticism and yet enjoyed *kirtan* as only few can and do. He was known nationally as a celebrated lecher but for the past thirty years at least it was a hot-water-bottle that warmed his bed. He devoted his last years in the service of a woman who decisively spurned him in the end. He made a profession of living off his friends' important names and yet worked single-handedly to diminish that very importance. Empty vessels make the most noise but Khushwant was always full of the Scotch he had cadged off others.

He was a much misunderstood man. So before the limp eulogies start pouring in (how Khushwant would have hated them!) let me set the record straight. As Khushwant once said, the obituary is the best place to tell the truth for dead men file no libel suits. (An agnostic to the end he didn't believe in the Resurrection.)

Khushwant was born in 1915 in a rich but not particularly educated home. They were Khuranas from Sargodha who made good in Delhi. His father, Sir Sobha Singh, was the contractor who built the city of New Delhi and who in consequence received a knighthood. In '47 it used to be said (somewhat inaccurately it must be admitted) that ninety-nine per cent of New Delhi was owned by the Government and one per cent by Sir Sobha Singh.

After his initial education Khushwant was sent to England to appear for the ICS. He didn't make it. Later he would tell a story of how he had made it to the Merit List but how that year there was a reserved place for a non-Jat from Phulkian state (later PEPSU) and how someone with less marks than him filled that place. But Khushwant was always a great raconteur so it is difficult to know what to believe.

Once bitten, twice shy. Khushwant didn't try for the ICS again but instead enrolled himself at the London School of Economics from where in the course of things he acquired a BA. The examiners decided to place him in the Third Class. After his degree Khushwant read for the Bar where he was equally successful. (His brother Daljit, now a businessman, was always the better scholar of the two.)

When Khushwant came back after six years in England a family friend asked his father: '*Kaka valaiton kee kar ke aayaa hai?*' (What has the boy done in England?) Sir Sobha Singh replied '*Time pass kar ke aaya hai jee*.' (He has been marking time.) It is unlikely the canny contractor was joking.

After the Partition Khushwant joined the Indian Foreign Service and this phase of his career took him to London, Ottawa and Paris. In this period he began publishing short stories on rustic themes. In '55 he shot to fame when a novel of his won a large cash award set by an American publishing house in order to attract manuscripts. It was a mediocre Partition quickie called *Mano Majra* (later published as *Train to Pakistan*).

Years passed. Khushwant kept writing books, on the *Jupji*, on the Sikhs, on India, stories, translations: many of them provocatively titled and indicative of his deepest desires, *I Shall Rape the Nightingale*, *I Take This Woman* etc. Some of these attempts were successful.

But success and cosmopolitan living did not spoil the earthiness of the robust Jat. He continued to down his Scotch with a ferocity that made his hosts nervous. He continued to tell stories that revealed his deep obsession with the anal. He had a theory that all anger was a result of an upset stomach and instructed his son to ask his mother if her stomach was troubling her whenever she scolded him. In his more smug moments he attributed his own iconoclastic calm to the severe constipation from which he had suffered since childhood.

In 1969 Khushwant took over the *Illustrated Weekly* and embarked on the most controversial phase of his career. On the editor's page Mario drew a bulb and Khushwant sat in it, along with his Scotch and dirty pictures. Sitting in that cross-legged position Khushwant took the ailing magazine from success to success, all along illuminating millions of readers on the more *outré* aspects of the world's brothels. Once in a while he tore into a friend's reputation. So great was our prurience that he became a household name in a short while.

Fame he had, honour he sought. In the early seventies an eminent Muslim journalist friend of Khushwant's approached Rajni Patel. Could Rajnibhai fix Khushwant with a Padma Bhushan? If the honour didn't come his way soon Sardarji would have a heart attack. Patel flew to Delhi twice and fixed it. Later Khushwant showed his gratitude in strange ways.

Then came the Emergency. Khushwant's friends and admirers were very troubled by his stand: Mrs Gandhi was Durga incarnate, Sanjay the New Messiah and the highways of the land were clogged with smoothly running Marutis. Many explanations have been offered for his position but I believe I am the only person to know the right one. (Khushwant in an unguarded whisky-sodden moment once opened up to me and told all.) And since it is only in obituaries that it is proper to disclose the little-known details of a man's personal life I shall come out with it now.

Impotence had claimed Khushwant back in the fifties. At first he had been sorely troubled by this condition (most Jats are) and had tried several remedies, mostly indigenous. This accounted for his immense knowledge of *jaree-bootees* and his disillusionment with quacks. When he had finally given up all hope of lighting the wick he had turned to other pleasures with a vengeance. (Exposing his friends' affairs was a favourite pleasure: it was envy compounded with righteousness.)

It must be remembered that Khushwant's lechery was of the mildest order: he was a voyeur, he could *do* nothing. Scotch was a palliative, but in the end even that failed to make up the loss.

It was Sanjay's power that finally did the trick. So great was the vicarious pleasure the ageing Sardar felt that it went to his head. And after Sanjay's death Khushwant lost his vitality, his vigour. He grew listless.

And then the quiet end. A lively man all in all. Even as I write this I am sure Khushwant is busy looking up the angels' skirts. And since angels are constitutionally condemned to celibacy that should suit Khushwant fine.

The Sunday Observer
13 February, 1983

Inkslinging: India's Dozen Top Columnists

I suppose I had better make my position clear before I go any further. I too am a professional columnist, but at twenty-five a young one. I am a new entrant in this stale field and I stumbled onto it almost by accident.

But then going by the form of most of these worthies it would appear they all stumbled onto it, almost by accident.

Sixteen months ago I found myself in Delhi, back from University and without a job. Several kind people offered me employment without my asking for it but I did not think it fit to encumber myself with either office or pay cheque. I had begun planning a novel and I spent my time working on it, 'perfecting alien techniques of observation'. It was in this period that I met the savvy editor of *India Today* and a couple of conversations later he very kindly offered me a column in his magazine. Meanwhile George Verghese, their Guest Columnist moved out to become Editor of the *Indian Express* and I stepped in his place. Step one.

The *Sunday Observer* in Bombay was the second step. Eight months ago I began a fortnightly column there alternating weekly with Abu Abraham's drolleries. Judging from the anger on the letters page I have been thoroughly unpopular with the *Observer* readers but fortunately there are other criteria than readers' response. At any rate, offers for

work have not dried up. This month I begin a column on the press in *Debonair*.

This personal note is by way of explanation, somewhat like members of parliament declaring their financial interests before they join the House and commence careers of noble back-biting. No doubt I shall be suspected of professional jealousy. Apart from declaring that the scene is so dismal there is nothing to be jealous of, all I can say in my defence is that age divides me from the dozen: an entire generation separates me from even the youngest of the lot, Shobha Dé.

At fifty-eight, Khushwant is the oldest bandicoot in the business and easily the most popular columnist in the country. A lawyer, press attaché and writer, Khushwant came to the column business late in life, in 1969, when he had been roped in by Bennett Coleman to edit the ailing *Illustrated Weekly*. From his first issue, 6 July, Khushwant started 'Editor's Page', a column in which the bombastic sardar sounded off on whatever important subject entered his turbaned head that week: Rajneesh, Krishna Menon, kissing in Indian films, oneupmanship, *chamchagiri*. Mario drew a bulb and Khushwant sat in it along with his Scotch and dirty pictures. The circulation of the *Weekly* soared.

Khushwant's column gave the new *Weekly* its lead. Like the magazine under Khushwant, the column was hopelessly down-market—complex issues were simplified to the point of banality, clichéd anti-poses were struck without much thought and anal humour became a norm. Khushwant didn't actually write these lines but they are a typical product of the Khushwant formula: 'There are only two differences between Englishmen and Indians. The English are honest while we are not and the English use toilet paper while we still rely on the left hand. Of course there's the question of colour but. . .' Whereupon an anecdote would follow, a raunchy story concerning one of his English friends, designed to show that colour was not a *real* difference etc. Brain rot was the price Khushwant paid for popularity.

For nine years he ran that entertaining nonsense. When he was sacked from the *Weekly* the management spiked his farewell column but Akbar at *Sunday* obligingly published it. These were his parting words: 'So farewell! I switch off the bulb in which I have sat with my Scotch and my scribbling pad.'

But that wasn't the last of him. True, for a while Khushwant was lost in the wilderness of the *National Herald* but he soon recovered and switched on the bulb once again at the *Hindustan Times*, which by now he was editing. In April 1980 'With Malice Towards One and All' was syndicated by Khushwant Singh Associates, a company the dirty old man of Indian journalism had founded presumably to minimize his tax liability. 'Malice' was no different from 'Editor's Page' but so successful was Khushwant's pap formula that three other papers soon started carrying it: Calcutta's *Telegraph* and Bombay's *Sunday Observer* and *Sunday Mid-day*. (The *Telegraph* carries 'Malice' on the Saturday it appears in the *Hindustan Times* while the Bombay papers carry it a full eight days later.) Earlier this year the *Hindustan Times* kicked Khushwant to the void upstairs but his 'Malice' carries on as before. All he has done with his new-found leisure is to write 'Gossip Sweet and Sour', another weekly down-market snippets column which is virtually indistinguishable from *Malice*, except that it is exclusive to *Sunday* and somewhat shorter. Brain rot is the only explanation for this failure to change or produce a different column: having played the formula for twelve years now Khushwant is incapable of commenting on the world except in vulgar predigested four hundred word snippets.

If Khushwant is the most popular of the columnists, Kuldip Nayar is the most published. A refugee from Pakistan, Nayar found himself in Delhi soon after the Partition without a job. It was a difficult period and jobs were hard to come by. In desperation he took to journalism. It paid off. Nayar rose. In the sixties he became press secretary to Lal Bahadur Shastri and then resident editor of the Delhi edition of the *Statesman*. Later as Editor of the Express News Service he began a column on the *Express* edit page called 'Between The Lines'. (The title came from Chalapathi Rau who suggested it for Nayar's book of the same title published in 1969.) Like the book, the column purported to give a view of what was really going on in Delhi, 'between the lines'. It was a 'factual' column in that it did more than merely speculate or analyze, but unlike Arun Shourie's facts, Nayar's were not verifiable: he didn't investigate cheque numbers or file numbers, he merely gave one version of events in high places making capital gossip a journalistic form.

In a watered-down sense Nayar was the first Indian practitioner of Tom Wolfe's New Journalism. He frequently wrote in the third person past tense using flashes of dialogue to liven up the account. For example: 'The telephone bell rang unusually long on September 24, 1968 in the office of the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. . . Pegor was visibly agitated when he and his lean, well-groomed interpreter entered State Foreign Minister Bhagat's room. "Mr Minister we are concerned to see the gist of the talks between the Soviet and Indian teams appearing in today's *Statesman*." ' But readable as Nayar's short story style was, he did not sustain it for long, soon lapsing into journalistic punditry. Further his command of the English language was far from adequate and the overall impression one got on reading 'Between The Lines' was: 'Interesting, but semi-literate.'

When S. Nihal Singh took over as editor of the *Express*, Nayar resigned claiming he had been superseded. In 1981 he syndicated 'Between The Lines' and today it is the most widely published column in the country. In addition Nayar writes 'Exclusive', a weekly column for *Sunday* and 'State Of The Nation', a monthly column for *Gentleman*. But what quality he had as a racy political gossip writer has gone and his desire to play pundit has resulted in making his writing quite unreadable.

Baiting Indira Gandhi has become a profitable activity these days. Done regularly and hoarsely, it makes for extremely popular copy and popular copy makes good money. Ashok Mitra, now Finance Minister of West Bengal at least did it intelligently in the *Telegraph* when he wrote his popular column 'Cutting Corners', but Rajinder Puri, M.V. Kamath, Janardhan Thakur and K.R. Sundar Rajan have made it a crude cottage industry. (Cottage industries can pay well: Ashok Mitra reportedly received Rs 2000 per piece: Rajinder Puri makes half that amount for each of his shrill pieces in the *Sunday Observer*, by far the highest paid contributor to the paper.)

M.V. Kamath began as a columnist in the fifties for the *Free Press Bulletin* writing 'The Gaslight Gossip'. It lasted nine years and was extremely popular. Then he went on to better things, serving as a foreign correspondent for twenty years and editor of the *Illustrated Weekly* for three. When he finally threw in the towel he came back to columns.

He started his column with the *Express Magazine* ('Odd Man Out') in October 1981. Then began the rash. 'All Things Considered' is his weekly column in *Mid-day* and the *Telegraph*. Four months ago Kamath started a fortnightly column in *Surya;* in addition he does a weekly vernacular column which is translated into both Marathi (*Janmabhoomi*) and Gujarati (*Pravasi*).

What Kamath gains in quantity he makes up in quality. His writing has come to resemble a uniform screech at Mrs Gandhi (whom he supported throughout the Emergency). A couple of Fridays ago I picked up a copy of *Mid-day* and found Kamath pontificating on Kapil Dev's victorious eleven approximately thus: 'Yes India can do it but not if Mrs

Gandhi goes on with her policies . . .' There was no need to read further. It was the genuine article.

Rajinder Puri was a cartoonist of some talent before he discovered that columnists got a better deal on the whole. A close associate of Charan Singh's, he is fond of such populist stunts as the occupation of the Ashoka hotel by *kisans*. He began his career as a columnist in the Janata period when R.K. Karanjia hired him, reportedly to get closer to Charan Singh. When the Congress (I) returned, Karanjia dropped him.

But by now Puri was an established columnist. These days he publishes regularly on the edit page of the *Sunday Observer* and has syndicated his 'funny' column which appears in the *Telegraph* as 'Last Word' and in the *Hindustan Times* as 'My Word!' His ironic writing is by far the better part of his output and occasionally, very occasionally, it can even be funny. Too often though, it is laboured and contrived. His 'serious' pieces in the *Sunday Observer* are well-known for their lunatic tone and even if he occasionally makes a good point his almost total lack of balance ensures that the point is obscured in a bucketful of mush.

K.R. Sundar Rajan began with the *Times of India* and rose to become senior assistant editor whereupon he wasn't allowed to write anything. (Sham Lal made matters worse by refusing to allow Rajan to publish pieces in other national magazines.) He did however write regular pieces for the *New Statesman* but apart from that he wasn't much known. His career as a columnist really took off when he was arrested during the Emergency. A hero of the Emergency, Sundar Rajan left the *Times* and started his political column for *Debonair*, 'View From Delhi' soon after. When the *Sunday Observer* began he was one of its original columnists, 'Delhi Despatch' appearing weekly on page two.

Sundar Rajan is not as persistent a baiter of Mrs G as Kamath and Puri but his opposition contacts and leanings made him a much better columnist during the Janata period when he had access in Delhi. Today his commentary has a tired quality about it, that of a pundit after the most lucrative *pujas* are over. Despite this he has a more balanced tone than most other Mrs G baiters.

Janardhan Thakur used to work for the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* where his copy was translated into Bengali. The Emergency was a godsend for him. He produced a quickie soon after the nightmare ended with the rather original title *All The Prime Minister's Men*. It was the Kuldip Nayar formula all over again, only racier, more gossipy and worse written. The level of analysis was distinctly coffee shop. ('Bansi Lal was certainly as inferior to Kairon as his protector, Indira Gandhi, was to Kairon's protector, Jawaharlal Nehru.' Really!) Predictably, it was a best-seller.

This suave and snobbish coffee-shop intellect proceeded to cash in on his success. *All the Janata Men* followed and *Ananda Bazar Patrika* appointed him contributing editor when Khushwant came to revive *New Delhi*. When Khushwant left, so did Thakur. In 1981 Thakur got into the garbage game and started Richa Features, which supplies reams of unreadable matter to the likes of *Mid-day*. Meanwhile he started a weekly syndicated political column 'Ringside View' which appears on page one of the *Free Press Journal*, replete with a picture of the man M.O. Mathai described as looking like a 'giant sausage'. With Nayar and the rest of the Mrs G baiters given to armchair pontification on the state of the body politic, Thakur at least provides a more interesting if crudely drawn picture of the Delhi circus.

In 1957, at the age of thirty-three, N.J. Nanporia became the youngest editor of the *Times of India*. Though it would be unfair to say its been downhill ever since, (he was the editor of the *Statesman* for many years) he has certainly not fulfilled the promise implicit in that precocious appointment. Today he spends his time writing an absolutely trashy column for *Mid-day*, 'Strictly Personal' and occasionally he takes up his dull books column on the *Sunday Review's* books page. No examples are needed to convey the sheer tedium of NJN's columns: anyone who spent six months walking in the Sahara will know what I'm talking about.

Busybee is different. He is often genuinely funny, though he suffers from having to produce copy every day. As a reporter with the *Times of India* he took over the 'Round And About' column from Sheshagiri Rao on the *Evening News* 'the year Red Rufus won the Invitation Cup'. (Dates elude Behram Contractor as one might expect from a cursory reading of Busybee.)

Busybee soon became a Bombay institution and several of his droll pieces were recognized as classics. But Contractor's other forays into the world of columns were less successful. He began 'Malice in

Blunderland' in *Blitz* and did several pieces for *Beautiful* bylined Mercury.

In 1979 Contractor left the *Times* to become chief reporter on *Mid-day*. He took his column with him and it appears there daily. His restaurant column appears less frequently. The *Telegraph* also reproduces 'Round And About' once a week.

Shobha Dé (nee Rajadhyaksha) is another Bombay creation. She began as a columnist with *Onlooker* when Venkat Narayan edited the magazine. For six months she wrote a fortnightly gossip column. 'They were brittle bitchy pieces,' she says, 'I was still going to parties and I had enough ammunition to enjoy myself with.' It is less certain that her readers enjoyed the column.

When Venkat left for *India Today* Dé moved on to *Mid-day* where she wrote a TV column without seeing any TV. Then she developed a conscience and began watching the idiot box. Immediately she got bored. Her next column was 'Close Encounters', a 'people' column with *Mid-day*. The former model was back to what she did best: gossip.

When *Sunday Review* was launched, Dé started a regular fortnightly column there in which she made her first mistake—she began to grow serious: drowsy meditations on monsoons followed by soul-searching pieces on herself. She also made it a vehicle for her irritations: estate agents and Indian Airlines were among the targets chosen by the now ageing cover girl for her Sunday sermons. The marriage of Beauty and Intellect was complete.

Abu Abraham, Iqbal Masud and Dom Moraes all write up-market columns. Abu began as a cartoonist with the *Guardian* and when he came back to India drew cartoons for the *Indian Express*. Two years ago he left the *Express* to turn freelance. Apart from his cartoons Abu has two regular columns: a fortnightly in the *Sunday Observer* and a monthly in *Debonair*. Abu can write well and interestingly: the problem with him is he has ceased to do so. A peculiar dull humour is what one has come to expect from Abu nowadays and this is a shame as he was often very entertaining, especially when writing on the press, Indian or British. Perhaps there is a lesson in Abu's case for all of us in the business: no columnist can expect to write interestingly for more than, say, two years.

Iqbal Masud is probably the most intelligent of the columnists in the country. Early this year he began a fortnightly column in the *Express Magazine* and it has been a great success. I had not cared greatly for his film reviews—foreign films in the *Sunday Observer* for over a year in 1981–82, Indian films in the *Indian Express* to date—and had once dismissed his prose as mostly piffle. But in view of his *Express Magazine* column and the occasional book review in the *Sunday Observer* (his review of Khushwant's translation of *Umrao Jan Ada* was the best book review I have seen in an Indian paper) I am prepared to take back my words. Much of his analysis is intelligent and his prose is free of the clichés behind which second-rate minds hide their laziness. Masud also writes a books column in *Gentleman* which is good, but about which I am less enthusiastic.

Dom Moraes is not primarily a columnist but ever since he descended on Delhi to write his biography of Mrs Gandhi he has run a column somewhere or the other. During the Janata days he wrote a fairly good political column for *Surya* (currying favour with Madam?) and after the Congress (I) victory in 1980 R.K. Karanjia signed him up to write a fortnightly column for *Blitz*, 'The Wolf Who Walks Alone'. As the title suggested, it was mostly nonsense.

When Moraes became Editor for Goenka's *Sunday Standard* he wrote an amusing famous-people-I-have-met column there and his inexhaustible store of anecdotes kept him going quite a while. Last year he began 'The Dom Moraes Column' in *Gentleman*, a three page version of the familiar incidents from Dom's life. One wishes Dom could think well but whatever the gaps in analysis, they are more than made up for by Dom's endearing prose and oblique line in wit. His occasional bummers aside he is the most engaging columnist in the business.

Today there are more independent columnists in Indian journalism than ever before. The post-Emergency magazine boom is partly responsible for this. More generally this is part of a change in public focus, from editor to columnist, a change that occurred in Britain and America several decades ago. Independent television with its innumerable chat shows (chat shows are among the cheapest TV shows to produce) would no doubt help in this transformation but the Janata party split before the recommendations of the Verghese Report could be implemented and the Congress (I) can hardly be expected to rob Doordarshan of its monopoly.

But independent television or otherwise, if columnists are to be better received they must write well. Most of the dozen I have considered are well past it. It is for the editors to take note. One cannot sell newspapers forever on dull familiar bylines. Bright new columnists must be discovered. Soon.

Imprint
August, 1983

Speaking of Ethics

Diligent readers may recall the occasion when, some months ago, in the *Sunday Observer*, I took up cudgels on behalf of the much maligned Sathya Sai Baba when his miracles were being 'exposed' by prejudiced men bearing science degrees and mendacious prestidigitators who couldn't stick to one version of the colourful tales they were peddling. But I raised my voice in vain. For three months ago we had incontrovertible proof of the authenticity of Baba's miracles. The evidence is now before our eyes: the holy soul of Puttaparthi has made an honest man of his devotee Rusi Karanjia.

I am convinced of the miracle. There can be no other explanation for what must be the most amazing interview to have been published in the past year, even though it is less than a page long. Last December's issue of *Imprint*, the one which displayed on its cover the charming visage of a dusky twenty-two-year-old pin-up girl, contained between its covers even more exotic delights. Resting in the middle of the cover story (prominently advertised as 'Journalists and Ethics: Bribing and Bitching') was an interview with the Grand Old Man of *Blitz* which contains gems which cry out to be quoted.

When asked: 'Do you look upon a newspaper as a business proposition or a medium?' The proprietor-editor of the *Daily* and *Blitz* replies: 'My basic faith is that it is a medium to reach the public. To tell them the truth. . . But we have to compromise. We don't expose our advertisers unless it is something very big. *If it is a racket of a few millions we kill the story*. If it involves crores we expose it.' (Italics mine.)

And it is not just Karanjia who has tasted the divine serum. Clearly Baba has worked a corporate miracle for in the same story Vishwanathan Nair of the *Daily* is quoted as saying: 'If a man gives us five to ten lakh rupees of advertising and if something happens in his establishment, then in the interests of the paper you don't write about it.' Such truth-telling is indeed laudable. At least we know where we stand. I had always thought the bulldog on the masthead of the *Daily* looked towards the Soviet Union every morning when he barked his assurance: 'We're on your side' but I was clearly wrong. He looks towards the advertisers, whoever they are. Still it gives me comfort to know that he is so faithful, as only dogs can be.

But it's not just *Imprint* that's gone to town on this ethics business. Doubtless given the lead by Arun Shourie's concise eight thousand word guest column in the *India Today* of 30 September, ('A Code for the Press') every matriculate in the land with a typing speed of over twelve words a minute (myself included) seems to have decided ethics are a good thing to waste some time on. And so in *Bombay* of all places we had Frank Simoes airing his views on the subject before the year ran out (7–21 December).

Three incidents involving press ethics have recently depressed Simoes. So he sets about telling us about them, not naming the people involved but identifying each in such a manner that his friends and quite a few others will doubtless catch on. I rarely get sick while reading a magazine but this sort of titillation trying to pass off as seriousness invariably makes my last meal churn within. By my books, ethics demand that one names names openly (except when the naming is likely to disturb law and order) if one has got something of substance; otherwise one shuts up. This tease of half identifying but not naming is not on. It is only purveyors of rumour and scandal who hide behind the libel laws by pruriently hinting at goings-on thus. (I don't know what Simoes's precise reason was in taking such disgraceful cover but it is sad to see so fine a man go the Khushwant way. It will be recalled that over a year ago Simoes put up a fine principled stand when the bearded columnist hid behind the hearse and fired his peashooter at Rajni Patel's dead body. But *tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis:* the times are changed and we are changed with them.)

I don't know the precise reason but one can guess. Simoes's third incident clearly concerns the *Telegraph*'s story about Dhirubhai Ambani's off-shore ventures. Simoes is frank enough about his utter ignorance in the matter: 'I don't know enough about the issue to take sides. . .' and 'I have read no other account, except this paper's' but that does not prevent him from slandering M.J. Akbar's excellent daily which, he claims, 'defiles the reputations of a cabinet minister, a notable industry leader. . . on evidence which is flimsy if not completely untenable'. Since Simoes does not demonstrate in his column that the *Telegraph*'s evidence is untenable and, moreover, since his confessions of ignorance in the matter suggest that he would be unable to do so even if he tried, it is difficult to know what point he is making about ethics.

But my point is clearer. I suggest it is Simoes who is unethical. Operating on the principle that sometimes it doesn't pay to be frank, Simoes has disguised the names involved because if he hadn't, readers would have made an instant connection and recalled that the man Simoes is so tenuously defending is none other than Ambani, the man who gave Simoes a really large account soon after the latter started his own advertising agency. (Even today, after Ambani has set up his own agency, advertising hands acknowledge that Simoes's finest line of copy was the memorable: 'A woman expresses herself in many ways and Vimal is one of them'.)

Shortly after Shourie published his column in *India Today* A.S. Abraham replied to it in the *Times of India.* Abraham suggested that it was greater professionalism that was required: Shourie had maintained that mere professionalism was not enough, he had wanted a moral commitment from those who wrote for the papers. It is a difficult question to decide and I can see the point both ways. Ideally, I would love to back Shourie but there are practical problems with his approach: how many newspapermen can afford to send their stories elsewhere and thereby risk their jobs when their editors kill their stories? Likewise I am suspicious of the professionalism Abraham espouses, not because I am suspicious of Abraham, but because I know enough about the profession and the professionals to know what the real concerns of (even honest) journalists are. Professionals are interested in 'stories'.

Given this context, it is depressing to read both Karanjia and Simoes on ethics in journalism. One is a professional, the other an amateur. Both celebrities sermonize on ethics while protecting their special interests. Much as I respect idealists like Shourie I feel there is a moral in this for them: that journalists are only human after all, whether amateur or professional. Can a code of ethics change that central fact?

Isn't it more likely that it will become yet another useless document, a relic of our hypocrisy?

The Illustrated Weekly of India
18 March, 1984

Goodbye, Mr Mehta

Early in July 1981—exactly seventy-five months ago—I climbed the ramshackle wooden stairs to the top of the second floor of the Agra building to meet Vinod Mehta for the first time. I was just down from university, curious, upon some weird mission of my own making. It was a large tubelit attic but for some reason Vinod pretended it was a newspaper office. He stood hunched over some pieces of white card as if in deep conspiracy.

Looking back, it seems like a really innocent world. Antulay still ruled Bombay and a local Doordarshan unit followed him everywhere like a tail; Aurobind Patel had not yet arrived from New York to give *India Today* its sexy look; Lala Jagat Narain was one of the few people around who thought we had a serious Punjab problem; there was no *Telegraph;* the recently returned MP from Amethi had not yet moved in to his 'office' at 2A Motilal Nehru Marg; Salman Rushdie had not yet won the Booker Prize.

The conspiracy hatched: in six weeks, almost single-handedly, Vinod Mehta created the *Sunday Observer*. Meanwhile, as if by magic, the outside world rearranged itself and all the stories of our time were born. A young Sikh called Jarnail was arrested in connection with Lala Jagat Narain's murder, Shourie won his first scalp and rapidly became the darling of the Indian middle classes with his article 'Indira Gandhi as Commerce', Rajiv Gandhi's new office acquired a computer.

The paper fizzed from the very beginning. I was in Delhi at the time but the reputation of the *Observer* reached me there though I confess I was too lazy to go over to Central News Agency to place an order.

I have heard it said that Vinod Mehta picked up his contributors at cocktail parties. Perhaps. But I think it unlikely. Through 1982 I know I had to climb up those makeshift stairs each time I wanted to place an article and it wasn't the physical effort that was demanding. Vinod Mehta was a shy, taciturn man; even when he accepted your article you were left guessing as to what he really made of it.

It was this quiet style that initially won my respect. I have seen other, more garrulous editors at work: editors who joke, editors who chatter, editors who confess, editors who yell. Vinod got people to work for him by using the sullen whisper.

For years I was terrified of him and in a way I still am. Last January I remember leaving a Jazz Yatra concert early to attend a party at the US club. As we passed Mahatma Gandhi Road I asked the cabbie to halt. It was 9.30 p.m. on a Saturday night. I had never seen the staff put the paper to sleep.

I rushed up the stairs intending to be a fly on the wall. I will not utter a word, I said to myself, I will disturb no one. But at the door I crumpled. Busy though the staff was I knew Vinod would not say anything in reprimand, I was scared of his severe glance. I walked down the steps and went to my party.

I never saw him laugh before the staff. And it was years before I felt I could have an ordinary conversation with him. Even then, we invariably spoke in his cabin which he would direct me to with a small wave of the palm. There is reason to believe that this forbidding exterior prevented him from knowing his staff as well as he might have. But the work got done, often with only a skeletal staff. Garrulity would have been impossible.

When he wanted to communicate, he did. Soon after I had begun my fortnightly column in November 1982 I ran into heavy weather. In successive columns I had argued that Rushdie peddled exotica and that Shourie couldn't think straight. When I next visited the office I found Vinod had been inundated with angry letters. Any other editor would have taken me into the cabin for a talk on the future of the column. Vinod remained taciturn. Nervously, I began banging away my next offering. At one point Vinod came, looked over my shoulder to see what I was up to. It was a reappraisal of Gandhiji and the nationalist movement. He paused, then patted me gently on the back and said in a whisper no one else in the office could possibly have heard: 'Don't worry, just give it to them.'

Daily newspapers may need to portion out empires; the *Observer* has always been compact enough to be run as a dictatorship. Every decision could have been taken by Vinod: he was always around. When he left last Wednesday after six years service he had five months leave owing to him.

While the rest of the staff enjoyed their weekend, Vinod came in on Monday afternoons and sat in the office, every day till the early hours of Sunday morning.

Unlike modern editors he didn't gad about the country on an expense account. When he left the office it was usually to eat in an Irani restaurant. When he went north to supervise the Delhi edition he flew economy class and stayed in a Daryaganj guest-house. The only extravagance I associate with him was something his secretary, Chinamma, once told me about: on Saturdays after lunch at the Wayside Inn Vinod would put his feet up in his cramped cabin and choke over a fat cigar. (She thought it a disgusting habit but was too polite to ever tell him so.)

It was such parsimony that made the *Observer* a financial miracle. A first-rate paper was brought out for less than the cost of a three-bedroom flat in the suburbs. At no point did the cumulative investment go beyond rupees twenty lakh; by the second year the paper was breaking even; by the fourth year the initial investment was more than recovered and ever since it has been a sheer money-spinner.

I do not think any other editor in India could have managed this. Perhaps the low rates we were paid worked in Vinod's favour. Last year, when the *Independent* was launched in Britain, at least one good journalist turned down a senior job on the paper on the ground that the salaries offered were *too high*. High wages merely attracted lazy old buzzards, he argued. A new paper needed people who wanted to write for it because it was different, because it was going to be good.

If money was not the incentive, what was? I can think of four reasons why it was worth working for Vinod Mehta's the *Observer*. One, he didn't muck around with your copy. If he didn't like a piece, he dropped it. There are very few editors in the world who respect the integrity of copy. In Britain, the *Spectator* is perhaps the only magazine where they follow this rule. For Vinod it was something sacred.

Two, the paper was not afraid to admit its mistakes. When the *Observer* made a fool of itself over the Haryana elections and readers wrote in pointing this out, Vinod didn't just print the letters in some obscure corner: he publicized them by reprinting the absurd headline: 'Cong (I) Heading for Victory in Haryana'.

Three, the paper was, to a remarkable degree, free of political lobbies. One has only to spend a few months in Delhi to realize the pernicious effect of *lobbybaazi* in the capital's newspapers.

Four, it was free of ideology. On the paper's first anniversary, Iqbal Masud argued that 'If a newspaper in the eighties . . . desires a genuine identity, it must have an honest, well thought out, *political* line. It can be Jan Sanghi, leftist, rightist, centrist, but it must be a recognizable line. Without that it will fall prey to opportunism of the grossest kind.'

Five years on, I think the *Observer* has survived Masud's stricture. What has made the paper so readable and provocative is its ideological variety. When no major newspaper in India was prepared to print articles in favour of the Muslim Women's Bill the *Observer* alone offered its columns to all shades of opinion. Vinod's own reasoned defence of the Bill ('Is it possible to hate the Bill yet support the Bill?') revealed a political sagacity difficult to come by in Indian journalism. [At least one prominent critic of the Bill changed her mind after reading the piece. When Shabana Azmi told me she had, I offered to pull out my tape-recorder and record her 'conversion'. She demurred. '*Ab tak woh mulleh mere peeche pade hain. Main yeh bayaan doon to* feminists *saari peeche pad jayengi.*' (Those mullahs are still after my life. If I give a statement like this all the feminists too will begin to hound me.) I sympathized.]

Opportunism of the grossest kind? I cannot say the record was faultless but I do remember Vinod resisting—though not always successfully—the pressure to run 'speculative' stories in the newspaper once the *Sunday Mail* had begun to hot up the competition in Delhi. 'We'll keep them for the Gallery', he said. On another occasion he pronounced, 'A Gallery item is only sixty per cent true.'

In the end we shrivel and die. The best stories are forgotten, the best lines misquoted, the best newsprint recycled. One shouldn't expect more from journalism. But something remains.I feel it in my blood, Vinod's *Observer* will pass into popular memory as Khushwant's *Weekly* has.

The Sunday Observer
4 October, 1987

What is a Newspaper?

> ***The dignity and the freedom of the Press are trammelled from the moment it accepts an ancillary position. To perform its duties with independence, and consequently with the utmost public advantage, the Press can enter into no close or binding alliances with the statesmen of the day. . .***
>
> —*The Times*, London, 6 February 1852

> ***A journalist pretty much has to give up any kind of political activity beyond voting. That is the price we pay for being newspaper people.***
>
> —A.M. Rosenthal (formerly Executive Editor),
> *The New York Times*

Earlier in the year when Mr Suman Dubey resigned his post as editor-in-chief of the *Indian Express* I wrote him a letter which went approximately thus: 'My dear Suman, I do not know the precise reasons why you have resigned but if they are what I imagine them to be I must congratulate you for doing a brave and principled thing. The *Express* is no longer a newspaper, it is a partisan pamphlet. Yours. . .'

Six weeks ago when I was offered a regular column in the *Indian Express* I turned it down. By way of explanation I recounted the contents of my letter to Suman, adding to the editor who had approached me that I normally write for newspapers.

It is not a frivolous debating point but one of the deepest significance. To be a newspaper it is not enough to look like one. Even if the *Organiser* were to appear on a broadsheet divided into eight columns which ran stories supplied by PTI and UNI, it would still not be a newspaper. The same goes for a house journal like Air India's *Magic Carpet*. Quite apart from the physical qualities there are some moral qualities that make a newspaper a newspaper.

Unfortunately, this subject has hardly been dealt with in India. The definition of a newspaper for the purpose of the Registration of the Newspaper Act is far too wide. The two Press Commissions could profitably have addressed themselves to this radical question but sadly skimmed past it. There are some glancing comments in Chalapathi Rau's writings but it is all, ultimately, unsatisfactory.

Perhaps this is the time to invite a full discussion on the subject; for the moment, however, I shall content myself with less than a complete definition. I shall take recourse to the philosopher's solution when he is faced with the problem of the spectrum. True, he says, I cannot draw a line demarcating orange from red but I can draw a band. The colour of any dot on the band will be indeterminate but any dot to the right of the band will be orange; to its left, red.

The negative test I propose is independence. What distinguishes a newspaper from a propaganda sheet or an advertisement brochure is its independence from those it writes about, whether they be government, corporation or theatre group. When a scriptwriter reviews his own film—as one did in the *Illustrated Weekly* some time ago: it was a rave review—we think it profoundly wrong. If the offending publication were to persist in such a policy of promotion it would soon cease to be thought of as a paper.

As Walter Lippman pointed out a newspaper is not a mirror to society but a flashlight. It can only illuminate selections of reality. That is the rarely perceived difference between news and truth. Therefore it becomes vital that the person who holds the flashlight, who makes the selection, behaves in such a manner as to inspire our trust.

This does not mean that newspapers and journalists cannot have opinions. The *New York Times* enforces a strict divide between the news-gathering and the comment-making parts of the organization but that is perhaps taking things too far. What is important is that the journalists—and the newspapers as a whole—do not conspire with corporations and politicians to play games. One expects fairness, not tepid neutrality. If the press is to comment on public life it should comment as a judge, not a conspirator. If the press claims special consideration in society it is because it is supposed to speak in the general interest, not the interest of a particular individual or group.

Not only must a newspaper be fair, it must be seen to be fair. Just as lawyers are not supposed to visit judges except in company or at social functions, there are restraints on the conduct of journalists. It is not for nothing that Article III of the Statement of Principles of the American Society of Newspaper Editors reads: 'Journalists must avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety as well as any conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict.'

It will be objected that my definition—inadequate as it is—is normative; so it is. To say that there are countries where partisan papers are called newspapers is nothing: I would reply that there are countries where dictatorships are called democracies.

It will be objected that my definition rules out activist journalism; that is a misreading of my case. I happen to prefer journalists who try to influence the public mind rather than public affairs, but that is merely a preference. I can see the point of those who wish to influence the shape of things. My point is that if they are to be treated as journalists—and not publicists—they must conduct their campaigns with probity. Whatever happens they must *never* collude with the actors upon whom they comment. But what if they do? As Shourie once wrote in the context of a code he urged upon the press, there can be no penalty save publicity. Article 19 (1-a) guaranteeing freedom of expression will still apply as it does for all citizens and the courts will enforce it but other journalists may reasonably withdraw fraternal support on the ground that the offenders have walked out of the fraternity. When a newspaper enters active politics it ceases to be a newspaper. Attacks upon its freedom to say what it will may be attacks on the freedom of expression but they are *not* attacks upon the freedom of the press. Leaving the press, however, opens such a problem to new freedoms: no one should object if the *Organiser* uses the ABVP volunteers to break a strike. But with freedom comes peril. Politics is a dangerous business and those who play it must be skilful or else they will get hurt. I think it was Harold Wilson who remarked. 'You don't join the bloody circus if you can't ride two horses at the same time.'

The draft of the President's controversial letter to the Prime Minister prepared at the Express Guest house and reproduced on the front page of this paper today is evidence of the politicization of the *Express*. If proof were required that the *Express* has ceased to be a newspaper, this is surely it. It is difficult to say how many people participated in this conspiracy against the Prime Minister but given this evidence it is possible to guess who some of them were. At any rate, there is enough to suggest that the preparation of this draft which provoked an unprecedented constitutional crisis in India was not the isolated act of a crank. It was part of a deliberate strategy of incredible audacity.

Is there not a pattern in events? On 9 March the President sends the Prime Minister a letter inspired by the draft prepared at the *Express* in which he accuses him of lying to Parliament. On 13 March this letter appears in the columns of the *Express*. On 15 March the *Express* editorially informs us that the letter 'makes the gravest charges against the Prime Minister'. On 5 April Arun Shourie in a signed article incites V.P. Singh to resign from his ministry. Within a week he does so. Then on 13 April the *Express* uses V.P. Singh's resignation as confirmation of its 'worst suspicions'. The front page editorial urges the President to dismiss the Prime Minister.

But for the moment consider the preparation of the draft alone. It is like a judge writing a brief which he then supplies to a lawyer so that the lawyer may present it before the judge in court the next day. Prem Shankar Jha recently wrote in the *Sunday Observer* of the Government's battle with the *Express:* 'How to Kill a Newspaper'. Jha thought the Government could kill the paper: he was mistaken. Mr Mulgaokar killed the paper back in March when he engaged in that fatal adventure.

This is, of course, not the first time that such megalomania has seized those whose job it is to run newspapers. In 1964, when Harold Wilson was elected Prime Minister, Cecil King, the chairman of the pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* met him with the expectation of high political office. Wilson offered him a peerage and a junior ministerial post at the Board of Trade. King, hurt, refused both job and peerage. The *Mirror* turned against Wilson.

By 1968, King was actively conspiring to remove Wilson and replace him with a National Government headed by Lord Mountbatten. In May that year the *Mirror* published an editorial signed by King himself entitled 'Enough is Enough' saying the country needed a new Prime Minister. As Peter Wright's *Spycatcher* now informs us, King was a 'longtime agent' of MI 5 who 'made it clear that he would publish anything MI 5 might care to leak in his direction'. Wright continues, 'It was all part of Cecil King's "coup" which he was convinced would bring down the Labour Government.'

The *Mirror* was saved. The board of the International Publishing Corporation got together and decided to sack King. The reason for his dismissal was politely given as his 'increasing preoccupation with politics'. I leave it to the readers to decide what will have to be done if the *Express* is to become a newspaper again.

The Indian Post
9 December, 1987

Indiscretion in Colombo

Two weeks ago in the *Observer*, London, and the *Indian Post*, Bombay, I published a report quoting J.N. Dikshit, our High Commissioner in Colombo, and the LTTE in Madras claiming that a secret deal had been struck between the Government of India and the LTTE last July which included a pay-off. Since then the substance and the details of my report have been confirmed by the government on the floor of the Lok Sabha. A palpable hit, as Osric might have said. Seldom is such solid verification obtained so quickly for so controversial a story.

Alas, not everyone was satisfied. But since it became difficult to dispute the fact, an attempt has been made to discredit the story in other ways. The *Statesman* of 6 April carried a front page report which quoted a 'highly placed Indian diplomat in Colombo' as saying that the interview with Dikshit was 'off the record'. That was not all. Friends I have rung from Colombo, where I am writing this, tell me that a whispering campaign has begun in India and that people in the ministry of external affairs have begun saying that I had obtained this controversial intelligence from Dikshit at a party after I had got him drunk.

For the record then: I have never met Dikshit outside the Indian High Commission. Sometime during the morning of 31 March I telephoned him at his residence (it was Mahavir Jayanti and therefore a holiday). After identifying myself as the South-Asia correspondent of the *Observer*, I asked if I could call on him. He suggested I see him in his office around 1.30 p.m. At 1.45 p.m. I turned up at the High Commission, signed the register recording that I was going to see Dikshit and went to see him. We spoke for a little less than an hour on various subjects connected with Sri Lanka. At one point—discussing a quite unrelated matter—he said, 'This is not for attribution': I nodded approval. If anything, that confirms that Dikshit was aware that the rest of the interview was on record. Anyway, at no point—during or after the interview and I have called on him at his office since—has Dikshit claimed that the interview was off the record.

When I learnt that the *Statesman* had carried this anonymous aspersion on my personal conduct on its news pages, I rang the editor responsible for the story to issue a correction. He said that he would carry the correction and added: 'This is very important for if the interview was on record, then Dikshit deliberately tried to put a spanner in the works.'

With all due respect to the editors of the *Statesman* it is this inanity that I wish to protest about. Everything in life is not planned. Diplomats are only human and they too can be indiscreet. From my conversation with Dikshit that day I was and am still convinced that he did not 'plant' this piece of information with a view to creating ill-will between the LTTE and the Government of India. Equally, he knew that I might quote him on this but didn't for a moment suspect that I would make this the focus of my story, didn't suspect that the whole matter would get blown sky high.

I believe Dikshit was trying to persuade a journalist he had never previously spoken to about the unreliability of the LTTE. I sympathize with much that he had to say and I do feel that his experience has been unfortunate. He very nearly pulled off a tremendous diplomatic coup when Mahattya and Hardeep Puri signed the secret agreement on 28 September at Palaly airport. Unfortunately, things did not work out and Dikshit ended up with egg on his face. If there is one thing that unites both Sinhalese and Tamils on this island it is their hatred of Dikshit. And not unreasonably but perhaps unfairly—life is often unfair—the government has no more use for him as a negotiator. As a result, Dikshit is quite bitter about the LTTE. It is this context that must be understood if one wants to work out why he allowed himself to be a little indiscreet in speaking to me.

I believe there is a similar explanation for Giani Zail Singh's disclosure about the thirty to forty crore rupees offer in an interview with Ritu Sarin in this magazine (*Sunday*) last month. Unfortunately, most of our heavy commentators are too busy looking for chicanery and motives that don't exist and lose sight of the simple human fact that people often make mistakes, that they often say more than is good for them to.

Perhaps this indiscretion occurs because so many people in our elite enjoy a cosy confidential relationship with journalists who forget that it is not only their job to know but to tell. A journalist I have spoken to since my story appeared said, 'Oh, I knew about the pay-off but I assumed it was off the record.' *Assumed.* Brilliant!

A journalist's principal duty is to his readers. It is a duty to replace a rumour with a report, to place facts on the public record so that they pass into history. Of course, if he has entered into an explicit arrangement with a source that he will not reveal the identity of the source, he must respect that arrangement. But it is not his job to assume that everything he is told as a journalist is 'off the record' until he is given specific permission to tell. Sadly, our journalism is riddled with such corrupt compacts and readers rarely, if ever, hear about them.

Sunday
17–23 April, 1988

What is the National Interest?

> *'The first duty of the press is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time, and instantly, by disclosing them, to make them the common property of the nation. The statesman collects his information secretly and by secret means; he keeps back even the current intelligence of the day with ludicrous precautions, until diplomacy is beaten in the race with publicity. The press lives by disclosures; whatever passes into its keeping becomes a part of the knowledge and the history of our times.'*
>
> —*The Times*, 6 February, 1852

The facts are simple enough: on 24 April the *Observer*, London, and the *Indian Post*, Bombay, published a story crammed with details about a RAW operation that went wrong. It was no ordinary operation. RAW was smuggling from Kabul a caché of arms including rocket launchers when a small slip occurred. It was the sort of slip that journalism thrives on.

On Thursday 19 November last year at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport a few stray bullets rolled onto the apron out of a crate that had just come in from Kabul on Indian Airlines flight IC 452. An alert securityman spotted the bullets and informed his superiors. Within minutes R.K. Neogi, DCP Palam,was on the scene. The crate belonged to a consignment of twenty-two crates; each of these crates was isolated and an X-ray examination commenced as both customs and police were convinced that they had hit upon a major haul of terrorist contraband.

The examination revealed more than just bullets. According to my informant—an eyewitness—there was at least one rocket launcher in the crates that were examined.

A dispute began between the customsmen and the securitymen each claiming credit for the haul. As appreciation letters were being written out, someone in civvies came in and identified himself to Neogi as a RAW operative. He claimed the crates contained government property and whisked them away before Neogi's men could open them and make an inventory of the contents. According to the Freight Delivery Register, these crates were collected from the cargo warehouse on 20 November.

The crates bore two addresses. The sender's address was given as:

Director General Communications
Pul-e-Bag, Hea
Amooni, Kabul

The consignment was addressed to:

Director General Communications
Sanchar Bhawan
New Delhi

Sanchar Bhawan is the building which houses the ministry of communications but a quick check with the ministry reveals that there is no such position as director general in the ministry, yet the Airway Bill Number 058 3035 4273 records the contents of the twenty-two crates as being 'telecom equipment' and clearly states that the addressee was the 'director general'.

When the details of this episode became known to me, I contacted B.G. Deshmukh, the cabinet secretary, and asked for an explanation. Deshmukh is the official RAW is supposed to report to; even so I did not expect an immediate response so I gave him twenty-four hours in which to furnish an explanation. The next day when I called Mr Deshmukh said he had been unable to 'get a final reply from that organization'. He said he could not ask me to hold my story as he was unable to confirm or deny it.

After I filed the story for the two newspapers for whom I write I went away to Bombay on an extended weekend. To be honest I thought the matter would be picked up in Parliament and would most likely feature in the debate on the home ministry in the Rajya Sabha. I also thought our free press would pick up the story.

I was wrong. Nothing appeared. Nothing happened. No questions were asked. No tempers ruffled. On Wednesday I decided to do the rounds. I began in the morning with opposition MPs who I thought would be interested in the story. With one exception none of the people I called on, really seemed to know much about the story. I may be wrong about this but with that same exception none of the MPs I called upon, seemed especially enthusiastic about it.

One MP, a senior parliamentarian, seemed especially concerned about his 'political career'. He kept saying, 'One story like this and my entire career could be ruined. I will have to corroborate the details of this story first.'

I appreciated the MP's desire to corroborate the details of the story and offered my services to that end, an offer that was not taken up. I came away with a sinking heart. The same MP had been quick to praise my last story—on the disclosure in Parliament—and ask questions about it. Had he not once tried to 'corroborate' with me whether or not Mr J.N. Dikshit and the LTTE had admitted to the fifty lakh rupees payment the government had made to the Tigers last August before raising the matter in Parliament?

The exception was Lt Gen Aurora who had read the story in the *Indian Post* and had already, so he informed me, requested a special mention in the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday. Later in the day I was reassured by Mr Subramaniam Swamy's enthusiasm but till then I felt it was just possible that most Hindu MPs did not like to raise embarrassing questions on Punjab. (In fact, even my telephonic conversation with Swamy made me despair about the attitude of most MPs: when I told him about my experiences he merely remarked, 'So, now you have come face to face with Hindu communalism.')

My experience with editors was even more disturbing. Of the six editors I called upon in Delhi only two assured me that they would look into the matter. The major papers—the *Times* and the *Express*—were frank about their line. They were not going to have anything to do with it. An editor I spoke to, said the story had been raised at the editorial meeting on Monday 25 April only to be turned down. On what grounds I asked. 'The national interest.' Another editor said he had been very interested in the story—in fact he had cut it out and pinned it on the notice board for his reporters to see. But ultimately his editor-in-chief had turned it down. The reason? 'The national interest.'

A third editor said: 'I don't dispute your facts. But you are trying to frustrate my plans. I have been working on something for a long time and now you are trying to frustrate it.' What was his plan, I asked. 'We have to bash up Pakistan, not a full war but aggression, beat up their army in a couple of incidents. Then I tell you this terrorism will vanish.'

I must have looked incredulous for he continued, 'You don't understand mass psychology. Border people are always with the victor. Beat up the Pakistanis, show the Sikhs that we are stronger than the Pakistanis and terrorism will languish on the vine. *Tum to aadhe Pathan ho tumhen to yeh baat pataa honi chahiye.*' (You have some Pathan blood, you should be aware of this.)

Forget for the moment how disgusting this frank admission sounds. Consider, instead, a general problem, what is the duty of the press?

In December 1851, Louis Napoleon, President of the French republic engineered a *coup d'etat* which would make him emperor of France. Without consulting his colleagues or informing the Queen, Lord Palmerston, the foreign secretary, expressed his approval on behalf of Great Britain.

The *Times* wrote against him and Louis Napoleon. The French 'Monarch' was displeased with the newspaper.

Lord Derby, in an address in reply to a speech from the throne chose to lecture the *Times* for its outspoken language and to claim that 'as in these days the English Press aspires to share the influence of statesmen, so also must it share in the responsibilities of statesmen'.

The editor of the *Times*, Delane arranged for a reply to this preposterous suggestion. On his instruction Robert Lowe wrote two editorials which appeared in the *Times* of 6 and 7 February, 1852. These editorials are the classic statements of our profession. Space prevents me from quoting them in entirety; what follows are some paragraphs which should be seared into the consciousness of our editors:

> The press lives by disclosures; whatever passes into its keeping becomes a part of the knowledge and the history of our times; it is daily and forever appealing to the enlightened force of public opinion—anticipating if possible the march of events—standing upon the breach between the present and the future, and extending its survey to the horizon of the world. The statesman's duty is precisely the reverse. He cautiously guards from the public eye the information by which his actions and opinions are regulated; he reserves his judgement of passing events till the latest moment; and then he records it in obscure or conventional language. The duty of the one is to speak; of the other to be silent. The one explains itself in discussion; the other tends to action. The one

> deals mainly with rights and interests; the other with opinions and sentiments; the former is necessarily reserved, the latter essentially free. It follows, therefore, from this contrast that the responsibilities of the two powers are as much at variance as their duties. For us, with whom publicity and truth are the air and light of existence, there can be no greater disgrace than to recoil from the frank and accurate disclosure of facts as they are. We are bound to tell the truth as we find it, without fear of consequences—to lend no convenient shelter to acts of injustice and oppression, but to consign them once to the judgement of the world. . .
>
> If the public writer shares in any degree the influence of the statesman he shares at least few of those personal objects which constitute so large a part of ordinary statesmanship. The responsibility he really shares is more nearly akin to that of the economist or the lawyer whose province is not to frame a system of convenient application to the exigencies of the day but to investigate truth and to apply it on fixed principles to the affairs of the world.

Sunday
8–14 May, 1988

How Disinformation Works

Was it Auden who spoke of 'the folded lie'? For the past ten days for eighteen hours a day I have been engaged in an attempt to unfold just such a lie, I cannot say I have been entirely successful but it is an exhausting job and I do not recommend it to the faint of heart.

As readers of this column may be aware, on 24 April I published in the *Observer*, London, and the *Indian Post*, Bombay, details of a RAW operation to smuggle arms into this country from Afghanistan. It was by any account an alarming operation, especially so since we do not know where the arms—ammunition, rocket launchers—went. In the news story I first supplied details of the consignment (date, flight number, consignment number, number of crates, an addressee who doesn't exist, etc.), then proceeded to speculate on the destination and purpose of the arms.

My speculations revolved around Punjab. To this day I cannot be sure about them, they remain speculations, as well they should till we have hard evidence that the consignment was meant for Punjab. But it is a reasonable speculation: after all there is no other part of India where rockets have gone off or been found in since November when the said cache came in.

But this week my column is devoted to a specific task, to working out exactly how the government tried to discredit my story by issuing a disinformatory denial to selected journalists, a denial which hardly sounds like a denial if it is read in its proper context and stripped of its fanciful additions.

On Friday, 29 April, General Aurora and four other members of the Rajya Sabha raised the matter in a special mention. The very next day a few selected correspondents were given a verbal 'denial'. Who gave it? UNI said 'informed sources'; *Times of India* News Service said 'official sources'. Both formulaic expressions are customarily employed when the remarks in question are 'unattributable' to the government. Since the Parliament was in session and the matter had been raised on the floor of the House it would make sense for the government to issue an unattributable denial in this matter. However, the *Telegraph* said the government had denied the story and later when I checked the matter with Mr Gopi Arora, spokesman of the government, he confirmed it was an attributable denial.

Anyhow, this is how the UNI story read:

> A press report that the government was supplying arms and ammunition to Punjab terrorists and then recovering these caches was 'totally unfounded and preposterous', according to informed sources here.
>
> The sources pointed out that this was not the first time that such reports appeared in the press seeking to show government's complexity in the actions of the extremists.
>
> 'There was no truth in the allegations made in the news story that arms were being imported from Kabul and then diverted to Punjab,' the sources said.
>
> The government was striving to restore peace in Punjab and the release of the Jodhpur detenus and some other Sikh leaders was in line with the government's policy to defuse the crisis in the state. The government was also taking a series of steps like

> fencing of the border to check the flow of arms into Punjab, the sources said.

Consider the lies and half-truths in the 'denial': the report referred to was clearly mine as no other report had appeared for months alleging anything like this. Yet nowhere in my report had I said that the government was supplying arms and ammunition to Punjab terrorists. I had not mentioned the terrorists at all and even my reference to Punjab was clearly marked 'speculation'.

It was an old trick of disinformation. I have alleged *A*, *B* and *C*. *A*, *B* and *C* cannot be denied. So you say: a report has appeared alleging *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D*. Not true, not true, not true. *D* is false, *D* is preposterous, *D* is untrue. By these means you hope to discredit *A*, *B* and *C*.

I drove down to the UNI headquarters on Rafi Marg and met the chief of bureau, Virender Mohan. I explained this very point to him and then added that it did seem unfair the UNI should carry the denial but not my original story. (According to the *Sunday Mail*, the UNI correspondent in London had carried an account of my story in the *Observer* on 24 April but it had been killed in Delhi.)

Mohan said: 'You are a journalist. You should understand what happens. Some things we have to carry.' I said I did not understand. Then he smiled and said: 'Read the UNI story carefully and you will see that nowhere is it denied that the arms came in. All that has been denied is that they went to Punjab.' I replied that was precisely my point, that the story had been written in such a manner as to suggest that my entire story was false, that UNI had collaborated to push through a piece of disinformation when by rights it should have (i) checked with my original story and not misrepresented it and, (ii) sought to have made abundantly clear this very point about the denial being a partial denial.

Needless to say the 'denial' was prominently carried on the front pages of many papers, alongside Martin Ardbo's 'denial' that no Indian was ever paid in the Bofors kickbacks. 'Report on Arms Import Denied' was the heading of the *Times of India*, Bombay, a patent lie as Mr G.K. Arora later confirmed. Then the 'denial' became a part of the official record of our times. When Prof K.K. Tewari raised the RAW arms deal during zero hour on Monday, 2 May, Balram Jakhar quickly said: '*Meri baat sun leejeeay. Aap log aapas mein kyon baat kar rahen hain. Iska khandan bhi aa gaya hai.*' (Please listen to me, why are you talking amongst yourselves. The denial of this has already appeared.) Jaipal Reddy went on to say that the contradiction was not sufficient and. . .

what else he and Balwant Singh Ramoowalia said I may not repeat here as the speaker used the excuse of the 'denial' to expunge it from the parliamentary record.

I wanted to know if the denial was official or not, attributable or not, whether the government had spoken or not. I went to see Suman Dubey about this. He was frank: 'I cannot tell you if the government has denied your story or not.' I said this was an incredible situation in which a spokesman for the government could not say whether the government has said something or not. He said he would check with his superiors and then let me know.

When I got back to Dubey he said he was not in a position to speak, that I should check with Gopi Arora, the secretary of the information and broadcasting ministry and the official spokesman of the Government of India.

It took me a day and half to get through to Mr Arora who was, justifiably enough, busy with Mr Najibullah's impending visit and other matters.

When I finally pinned him down this is what he had to say: 'Your story had two parts. Government has totally denied the speculation that arms have been supplied by it to terrorists in Punjab.' I interrupted Mr Arora to point out that my speculation did not speak of terrorists. 'But General Aurora did in the Rajya Sabha,' he said. 'He may have,' I said, 'but he did not write my story.'

Gopi Arora continued: 'However, the second part of your report, the specific allegation that RAW imported arms on 19 November, has not been denied. We do not comment upon such things.'

So at last on 5 May the 'denial' of 30 April had been put into context. I typed it up as a press note on my *Observer* notepaper, signed it and went around to the Delhi dailies and news agencies circulating it. Of course no one used it.

That same day the RAW arms story was brought up twice in the Rajya Sabha. In the morning it featured as the subject of a supplementary put to Mr Santosh Mohan Dev, the minister of state for defence. The minister was quick to point out—like Mr Jakhar before him—that a denial had been issued. He said there was no *prima facie* evidence in support of the story.

Mr Jaswant Singh asked how the government could 'deny' the story when the cabinet secretary, B.G. Deshmukh, whom I had contacted while writing the story, had said that he could neither confirm nor deny the story. Mr Dev explained that the denial the government had issued was based on information obtained from the Prime Minister's office and the cabinet secretariat. 'It was only a story,' he said.

Within hours the government changed its line. That afternoon, during the debate on the extension of President's Rule in Punjab, Atal Behari Vajpayee read out the *Observer* story and demanded to know the facts. In reply Mr P. Chidambaram, minister of state for home affairs, got up and *admitted that RAW had brought in the consignment.*

It was an extraordinary admission, the first of its kind by the government since RAW was set up. It begins, like all government utterances on the subject, by referring to the 'denial' but in the course of the statement the 'denial' is shown up for what it really is.

In the public interest—and because so few newspapers have even so much as bothered to carry the minister's statement or even a reference to it—I quote it in its entirety.

> I want to be very careful in the choice of my words so that I am not misunderstood. An official denial was issued describing the allegation that an intelligence agency imported weapons which found its way into Punjab. An official denial describing the report and the allegation as highly preposterous was issued. The intelligence agencies in this country—and Mr Vajpayee has been in government and knows it—do obtain equipment from time to time for their own purposes, namely, analysis, research and keeping themselves abreast of what is happening in the world. No government ever comments publicly on the activities of intelligence agencies, but let me assure the House that the equipment which came in has been accounted for. It is highly unfair, preposterous, and wrong to suggest that any part of any equipment found its way into Punjab or to the hands of terrorists in Punjab. I sincerely hope this unnecessary, unseemly and baseless controversy will come to an end with this statement of mine.

The agencies did refer to the minister's remarks but in the middle of larger stories. Of the newspapers only the *Hindu* picked it up and gave it the prominence it deserved by placing the item on top of the front page of their issue of 6 May. The *Times of India* which ran the 'denial' on page one ignored the minister's statement as if it had never been made. And the *Indian Express?* They have ignored this entire episode as if nothing ever happened by blacking everything connected with it, including the seven exchanges in Parliament, even the minister's extraordinary statement. Some months ago I had argued in the *Indian Post* that the *Indian Express* was no longer a newspaper. I had not thought the editors of the *Express* would provide such ample vindication quite so soon.

Sunday
15–21 May, 1988

The Conservative in India

I. CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POLITICS

Dhiren loved to demolish heroes. He attacked Rajiv Gandhi and his government when everyone else was singing their praises and was equally determined to defend Rajiv Gandhi when the grand conspiracy to oust him from office was put together in the offices of the *Indian Express*. In the earlier phase, Dhiren's encounter with the Prime Minister's irrepressible press aide was inevitable. An interesting love–hate relationship developed between the two. While Mani Shanker Aiyer never tired of venting his expletives on Dhiren, the latter could seldom resist a sarcastic aside at his expense. When the anonymous piece on Mani appeared in *Private Eye* the unknown author was not too far to seek. Dhiren took great delight in the piece. Mani, a Cambridge man, summed up his chagrin with the following statement, 'The trouble with Dhiren is that has been to all the wrong places—Mayo, Elphinstone and Oxford.'

Indira Vs Jaggannath

vidya-vinya-sampanne
brahmane, gavi, hastini
suni c' aiva svapake
ca panditah samadarsinah

(Wise ones see the selfsame thing in a Brahmin wise and courteous
as in a crow or an elephant, nay,
as in a dog or outcaste.)

—*Gita* 5:18

News that Mrs Gandhi has been denied entry into the temple of Lord Jaggannath in Puri, takes me back to my visit to the temple last December. I was travelling through Orissa and in Orissa, frankly, there is not much to see apart from the temples. So I was doing the rounds. On any one day I would see up to eight temples (in Bhubaneshwar alone there are a lakh) and my reaction to them varied greatly: some of them were gorgeous but unused, the others were, usually, filthy: bursting vessels of the living faith.

Lord Jaggannath's seat was one such. I arrived there in the late afternoon, but the sun had not yet loped away so I was treated to the sight of the gaudy paint on the *shikara*. No one stopped me when I went inside. The priests for the most part were sleeping, fat bundles wrapped in white cotton, so I guessed they had had a satisfying lunch. I lolled about for a few minutes, and then walked out, unaware that I had violated the rules of the temple.

The fact is, I shouldn't have entered the holy spot in the first place. But I am a Hindu, a believer, so why am I not allowed into the temple? Going by the past decisions of the Muktimandapa pandits, the ones who are consulted by the *sebaks* of the temple when such a question arises, I can think of at least four reasons why. One, I am not an idolator myself, though I can see the point of idolatory. Two, I 'do not observe caste differences' as the devout of the temple do and 'dine together irrespective of caste differences'. Three, I have 'accepted cooked food from the hands of the Muslims for over a year'. And four, I have been abroad on what would amount to a pleasure trip. The decision in which this last injunction is contained is delightfully worded so I reproduce it in entirety in the interest of general amusement:

> Question:*Whether or not the Hindus who had been to England . . . can enter the temple of Lord Jaggannath?*
> Decision: ***Those who have been overseas for pursuing their studies and in obedience to the unavoidable orders of the Government and at the time of emergencies which do not amount to a pleasure trip to the islands across the ocean and on returning home have undergone ritual purification and are readmitted to their own society can enter any Hindu temple.*** (Quoted in *Cultural Tradition in Puri* by N. Patnaik, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977.)

And now the Prime Minister has been refused entry. I have not examined the decision of the pandits and the *sebaks* myself but going by the press reports, in particular the report that appeared in the *Sunday Observer* two weeks ago on the front page, it appears the main argument against Mrs Gandhi entering the temple is that having married a Parsi she is no longer a Hindu and therefore has no business entering a Hindu temple.

It is an interesting argument and I shall come to it in a minute but before I do I would like to attend to two legal questions that might be provoked by such a stand. One, in what sense is Mrs Gandhi a Parsi? Though she married a Parsi the law does not recognize her as one. The classic legal definition of a Parsi comes to us from Justice Davar in the Sir Jeejeebhoy judgement (BLR 11 p 86) and it is clear on this point:

> . . . the Parsi community consists of Parsis who are descended from the original Persian emigrants and who are born of both Zoroastrian parents, and who also profess the Zoroastrian religion, the Iranies from Persia professing the Zoroastrian religion who came to India either temporarily or permanently and the children of Parsi fathers by alien mothers who have been duly and properly admitted in the religion.

Two, granted that the law recognizes her as a Hindu, do the *sebaks* have the legal right to stop Mrs Gandhi from entering the temple? It would appear so. The temple is owned by Lord Jaggannath himself (in India an idol is a legal entity which can sue and be sued, which can even sit on the Board of Directors of a company) and ultimately, of course, it is for Lord J himself to decide whether or not Mrs G enters the temple. But the law does not repose much faith in the ability of the Lord to intervene in worldly affairs; hence the Orissa Hindu Religious

Endowments Act, 1952 which puts the matter tactfully: '. . . it is only in an ideal sense that property can be said to belong to an idol; and the possession and management of it must in the nature of things be entrusted to some person as a *shebait* or manager. . . As regards the property the manager is in the position of a trustee.'

But even if the *sebaks* are well within their legal rights in disallowing Mrs Gandhi from entering the *devasthanam*, it is not clear that they have the moral authority to do so. Let us examine their argument as reported in the papers.

The headline of the *Observer* story read 'Mrs Gandhi "Not a Hindu", Denied Entry into Puri Temple'. If the report is correct the Muktimandapa pandits have come to a very peculiar decision for none of the classics they usually consult in deciding such questions, the *Matsya Purana*, the *Niladri Mahodaya* or the *Bamdeb Samhita*, make any reference to either Hindu or Hinduism.

There is a good reason for this: the word *Hindu* is a foreign word, as is the notion itself. It is a Persian word and etymologically, does not refer to any religion but, rather, is a geographical word, meaning he who lives by the Indus, or Indian. It was not used by Indians till Muslim rule began. So there is no scriptural rule for determining whether or not someone is a Hindu as both the term and the notion didn't exist when the scriptures were put together.

Yet this is not the first time the pandits at Jaggannath have ruled that someone is 'not a Hindu'. When asked to decide whether or not those who publicly accept food cooked at the hands of Muslims are to be allowed into the temple they ruled *inter alia:* 'If they have been accepting cooked food for more than one year they have become Muslims and should be treated as such. . .'

When the Puranas were put together the only differences within Indian society were that of caste: as a result the rules in those texts don't deal with the possibility of alien religion. By blindly applying the letter of those texts to modern problems the pandits at Jaggannath have come to absurd decisions like the one I have quoted above. Unlike English judges the pandits don't cite the rules they invoke in their judgements but it's my guess that CC XXVII: 55 of the *Matsya Purana* is the source of this decision: 'A Brahmana who indulges with a Chandala woman or a woman of a different caste *or eats their food* or accepts a gift from them unknowingly falls from his position. *If he does so knowingly he becomes of that caste himself.*'

I have no doubt they have applied this rule to Mrs Gandhi's case as well and declared that she is thus of her husband's caste, *i.e.* a Parsi.Being a Parsi she is not a Hindu. And not being a Hindu how can she enter Lord Jaggannath's abode?

This absurd result is but the latest manifestation of an unfortunate tendency that gripped us Hindus when we came in contact with the foreigner: we became obsessed with petty rules of caste identity and forgot that the divine is in all men. 'Our religion is in the kitchen,' wailed Swami Vivekananda. 'Our God is the cooking-pot, and our religion is "Don't touch me, I am holy." If this goes on for another century, everyone of us will be in a lunatic asylum.'

If only in the interest of public sanity, Mrs Gandhi *must* enter the Puri temple. An outcaste myself, I will join her.

The Sunday Observer
29 September, 1983

Why the Nehrus Survive

The future of India is today, as it always has been, anybody's guess. So one can sympathize with the teams of subcontinental specialists who have been called upon this past week to speculate about it on the box. 'Do you see a bright future for India,' Brian Walden asked his team on *Weekend World*, 'or a pessimistic one?' Having left their tea-leaves at home, they did what they could. Fudge-fudge, waffle-waffle. ('Well,' concluded Walden, and I quote from memory, 'you've all said much the same thing, which is hardly surprising as you're all experts.')

But if looking forward won't help, looking back might. At this point it seems an altogether more reasonable enterprise to try to understand the historical circumstances in which Mrs Gandhi's extraordinary career played its way, to trace the parameters within which she made her choices, and to work out what it was that caused her to propel Rajiv to power.

Mrs Gandhi was not an aristocrat, nor was her father, however aristocratic they appeared. Their ancestor Raj Kaul was a Kashmiri scholar who migrated to Delhi in 1716 and was well-received at the Mughal court; with the decline of the empire the fortunes of the family dwindled and in 1861, the year Mrs Gandhi's grandfather was born, the family was being supported by his brothers, one a scribe, the other a schoolteacher. It was a Western-style legal education that enabled the family to rise once again, to enter the new class of the time, a middle class that was being created throughout the country between 1860 and 1890, united by the knowledge of English and the new learning that came with it. It was as if the experience of an English education annealed these people, deadened the nerves that connected them to their communal origins.

Modern India was not invented in 1947. Reading recent commentators, however, one might think that it was. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie had spoken of India as 'the new myth' of the year of independence, 'a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream.' He had a good point about the dream, though he was wildly off when he came to the date he assigned to it. *Midnight's Children*, however, was a work of fiction and it didn't seem worthwhile correcting its facts. (Mrs Gandhi thought otherwise, and her lawyers obtained an apology from Rushdie for another appropriation of fact.) This week in the *Times* he seemed to repeat the point: '. . . whereas India itself is a mere thirty-seven years old.' V.S. Naipaul in the *Daily Mail* (billed as an 'authority on Indian affairs') similarly seemed to miss the significance of this Victorian class whose intellectual revolution was far more important than anything India has seen since.

It was these people who invented modern India. Hindu College, Calcutta, was founded in 1817 and by 1827, a year before he obtained an Assistant Mastership there, an eighteen-year-old prodigy, Henry Derozio, was already addressing sonnets *To India—My Native Land:*

> Well—let me dive into the depths of time,
> And bring from out the ages that have rolled
> A few small fragments of the wrecks sublime. . .

Not very original verse, perhaps, but the message in it was. Macaulay's celebrated *Minute on Indian Education* followed in 1835 and soon enough what Ripon was to call 'the daily growing body of Natives educated by us in western ideas and western learning' was everywhere, clamouring for change, both within government and within Indian society. In 1870 Mrs Gandhi's grandfather's eldest brother became one of the first (Western-educated) lawyers of his province. (A few years before that my great grandfather's eldest brother became the first MA in the Punjab: this is nothing exceptional: trace back the families of most members of this class and you will find many such 'achievements'.) The twentieth-century nationalists have, on the whole, ignored this class but Anil Seal's *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (1968) has provided an excellent account of its composition and influence.

The first generation was educated in India, the next generation (at any rate, a lot of them) went abroad. In 1907 Jawaharlal Nehru went up to Trinity, Cambridge. Four years later my grandfather went up to Pembroke, Oxford. Not surprisingly, they picked up the ideas that were in the air. (Both Nehru and my grandfather were exceedingly fond of Swinburne, an interest stimulated perhaps by the vogue for the poet around the time of his death in 1909.)

Then something strange happened to this class which was destined to rule the country at some eventual date: they became infatuated with universal franchise (an idea that was in the air then) and in becoming so they hacked away at the source of their own power and position in Indian politics. Mahatma Gandhi's call for mass politics at the 1919 Congress seems to me to be the point when this class abdicated its political position. Of course the effects were not felt immediately: the men of this class still led the nationalist movement and when independence arrived they were the ones who got elected. But mass democracy made it increasingly difficult for their descendants (for the most part, urban creatures) to possess adequate power bases. And then there was the question of money. The reality of Indian democracy is that the capitalists control it. Three factors—low motivation to vote, huge constituencies (ten times the size of Britain's) and general poverty, the fact that even if you cannot successfully bribe a voter to vote for you it is not offensive to offer him seventy pence in the hope that he might be influenced—have between them pushed up the cost of elections to a figure which no honest man can afford. So candidates are routinely sponsored by both regional and national capital and members of our class are too mindful of their bourgeois honesty to submit to such an arrangement. Consequently they have retreated to the civil service (though it is no longer a preferred career), the professions and the British companies of Calcutta and Bombay.

'I cannot really see her playing bridge in the afternoons: I do not ever see her in the cottage of her dreams.' That was Dom Moraes in his biography of Mrs Gandhi four years ago but it could have been any of us:

no one could imagine Mrs Gandhi calling trumps at the Delhi Gymkhana. And that was the importance of the Nehru family within our class, within the nation. Theirs is not the only family from our class to have tried its hand at politics in recent times, but theirs was the only family from this class to have held on to a substantial power base and to have consolidated it. And this class is important because it is the only class to have fully appreciated the idea of a secular modern India: the Janata disaster (the power-brokers in that government belonged to another class) is something we should never forget, no matter how happy we were when Mrs Gandhi's Emergency government lost the elections. If India disintegrates in the future it will doubtless be because this class, which dreamt the dream of India in the last century, will no longer be around as an adhesive and the more parochial loyalties of the other classes will triumph. (In 1966, when Mrs Gandhi finally conceded the demand of the Sikhs for a Punjabi-speaking state, Hindu mobs began rioting. Three Congressmen were burnt alive in Panipat by Hindus instigated by the opposition party, the Jan Sangh, and Mrs Gandhi, in a rare moment, lost her cool and stormed at a civic reception for the visiting Yugoslav Premier: 'They are not true Indians.')

Mrs Gandhi had a troubled relationship with her own class. In the fifties Nehru, accompanied by his daughter, visited Tokyo. The Indian community in the city was small enough to gather in one place to meet him. My mother noticed that in their otherwise faultless hospitality the Japanese had forgotten to provide the visiting Prime Minister with the red rose he was accustomed to wearing in his buttonhole. But by the time my mother got to the meeting, the rose she had bought for her hero had blown a bit. After his speech, Nehru was signing copies of his books. My mother went behind the table at which he sat and stood between Nehru and Mrs Gandhi waiting her turn. Mrs Gandhi suddenly snapped: 'But that rose is too big.' Upset, my mother was about to run away when Nehru diplomatically pressed her hand in silent acknowledgement.

It was only in 1971 when Mrs Gandhi had led India to victory in Bangladesh that my mother forgave Mrs Gandhi. But four years later, when the Emergency was declared, my mother took back the forgiveness. And after Mrs Gandhi's victory in 1980 my mother did not know what to think of her. The political commentators of our class, however, did not share my mother's confusion. They made her out to be a simple villain, one who had a hold on the 'uneducated' Indian masses. Last year when the editor of the *Sunday Observer* in Bombay, wishing to balance the tone of political comment in his paper, looked for a political columnist who might be sympathetic to Mrs Gandhi's policies, he found it tough going. Finally he concluded that of the scores of columnists in the country the editor of the *Times of India* was the only man who fitted the bill, and unfortunately he wouldn't take the job. Till last week, the position was vacant.

What these commentators failed to recognize was that Mrs Gandhi was not as free as their judgements implied. Consequently Mrs Gandhi has been praised and blamed for things she deserved neither praise nor blame for. To illustrate this, I shall look at the single most inexplicable action of her career, calling the elections in March 1977. Though everyone recognizes that she was convinced she would win, it is nonetheless considered creditable that she thought democratic endorsement was important. A typical judgment, this is from the *Times* obituary: 'To her credit, however, she decided to call a general election in March 1977. . .'

When Dom Moraes asked Mrs Gandhi if the desire to appear a democrat was what caused her to call the election he was cut short by one of the lady's famous freezes: 'That's not a very intelligent question,' Mrs Gandhi said chillingly. Mrs Gandhi's cousin and critic, Nayantara Sahgal in a recent book *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power* (1983) devotes a chapter to this vexed question, veers towards the correct answer and then falls short of a satisfactory explanation. According to Sahgal, the 1971 Parliament had secured for Mrs Gandhi her own power base, the 1977 Parliament 'would ensure Sanjay's if it brought in a majority of his handpicked supporters.' But this idea collapses under the objection Sahgal is honest enough to raise, that according to Mrs Gandhi (and other sources) Sanjay had advised against the election. Sahgal then concludes that though democracy was not Mrs Gandhi's 'style', it was 'an insistent craving'. Back to square one and the unintelligent question.

Of course there are always a host of reasons why such a major decision is taken but important among these must surely have been the imminent threat from dissidents within her own party which Mrs Gandhi was facing towards the end of 1976. Some work suggesting this has been done by Myron Weiner of MIT (*India at the Polls*, 1978) and Angela S. Burger of the University of Wisconsin. The fact is that in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Bihar, Congress state legislators had met to protest against the socialistically phrased 42nd Amendment. Some two hundred amendments to the 42nd Amendment had been sent to the law minister by Congress legislators. The Congress parliamentary party had refused to accept constitutional amendments proposed by the government that would have transferred agriculture from the control of the state government to the central government and removed the right of property from the Constitution. Confident she would win, Mrs Gandhi seems to have thought she could use the election as an opportunity to whittle away the power base of these dissident legislators by refusing them seats. Sanjay's boys were to have been given most of the Congress seats. It was only after Jagjivan Ram's defection on 2 February that Mrs Gandhi panicked and revised the list of seats. But by then it was too late; perhaps it was all along.

Likewise when Mrs Gandhi often acted in an undemocratic manner (toppling state governments, playing with communalism) it was often because of compulsions (the opposition would have played with communalism, etc.) that the newspaper reader was blind to. Because so often the newspaper columnists were equally blind. This is not to say she did not make mistakes, and conversely, that she did not achieve anything; rather that she achieved less and destroyed less than it is common to suppose. She held on.

An instance of the monumental blindness of liberal journalists of our class to the obvious was on view on the box around noon last Wednesday. We knew Mrs Gandhi was dead, her successor had not been sworn in. The resident editor of the Delhi *Times of India* suggested the home minister would succeed her, the London correspondent of the Calcutta *Telegraph* thought that the finance minister would. What about Mr Rajiv Gandhi, asked the moderator? No, they said sagaciously, he lacked the necessary experience. Within hours he was sworn in, the obvious candidate by any reckoning, the last surviving descendant of the nineteenth-century new class who, thanks to his family, retains a rural power base.

The Spectator
10 November, 1984

Death of the Opposition

On 28 December, as reports of counting came in from the constituencies, a reporter from the *Indian Express* went to see Charan Singh, the unofficial leader of the opposition. The Jat leader was sitting alone on the lawn behind his whitewashed colonial bungalow on Tughlak Road, his head in his hands. Could the octogenarian explain what had happened? 'You explain to me,' Charan snapped. 'The world has changed.' What would the eighth Parliament be like? 'Parliament? What are you talking about? Just shoot all politicians. Yes, you, me, everyone.' The thick rubbery neck commemorated in hundreds of cartoons began to stretch and Charan Singh lifted his head. 'All logic has failed. This is no small thing that has happened . . . men may come and men may go but what is happening is very strange.' Then the head dropped back into the hands.

One could, of course, suggest that Charan Singh would have found things less strange if he had read the *Spectator* regularly. Or that he should have taken note of what Rajiv Gandhi kept reiterating before the polls: 'After this election, there will not be any opposition.' It was no idle threat. Just as soap is sold in America, political parties in India win votes by creating—and then exploiting—anxieties: traditionally Congress has won by creating anxieties in the minds of the minorities, the Untouchables and the Muslims; this time round they have succeeded in giving the caste Hindus the scare as well. The problem that faced Congress in northern India was this: how does one win the caste Hindu vote without losing the Muslim vote? The solution they hit upon used the Sikhs: prod the militant Sikhs enough and you can rely on them to create enough terror to drive a great many caste Hindus to your camp while the Muslims, the traditional enemies of the Sikhs, look on. And when the Sikhs have created enough terror, terrorize them in turn, appeasing the rest of the caste Hindus. By now there is so much anxiety in the country that both Hindus and Muslims vote for stability, for the only party that can possibly form a government. And the opposition can be relied upon to oblige by refusing to recognize what you are up to, by refusing to consolidate in order to provide a stable alternative.

The day the news of the landslide came in, the Congress party moved into its hundredth year. Distracted perhaps by the noise of the firecrackers, people seem to have forgotten that it was also the ninety-ninth birthday of the Indian opposition. In the early 1880s Ripon had spoken of 'the hourly increasing . . . necessity of making the educated natives the friends, instead of enemies, of our rule.' But the blatantly racist reaction of the European community to the Ilbert Bill (1883), an amendment which sought to empower Indian magistrates to try European offenders, and Ripon's subsequent backtracking, left the educated Indians sullen and betrayed. In 1884, worried by this development, a retired Englishman, Allan Octavian Hume, got the bright idea of organizing in each province annual get-togethers of leading Indian politicians, presided over by the governor of each province, 'that thereby great cordiality should be established between the official classes and the non-official Indian politicians.' Early in 1885 Hume went to Simla to discuss his idea with the new viceroy, the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava. According to W.C. Bannerjee, a Bengali barrister who became the first president of the Indian National Congress:

> Lord Dufferin took great interest in the matter and after considering over it for some time he sent for Mr Hume and told him that, in his opinion, Mr Hume's project would not be of much use. He said that there was no body of persons in this country who performed the functions which Her Majesty's opposition did in England. The newspapers, even if they really represented the views of the people, were not reliable and as the English were necessarily ignorant of what was thought of them and their policy in native circles, it would be very desirable in the interests as well of the rulers as of the ruled that Indian politicians should meet yearly and point out to the Government in what respects the administration was defective and how it could be improved. . .

Dufferin did not think it a good idea that such a body be presided over by local governors. Without letting on that the viceroy was the author of one of the plans, Hume put both proposals to the leading politicians of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras and they unanimously plumped for Dufferin's idea of an Indian opposition. The 'Conservative Adventure' of the 1870s which had ended in disaster under Lytton had been replaced by the 'Liberal Experiment' of the eighties.

In some ways inventing the opposition was just an experiment, not a measure the authorities felt was essential for the continuance of the Raj. Hume had insisted that Congress would be a necessary 'safety valve' to prevent another mutiny but the viceroy didn't think much of that argument. 'He is clever and gentlemanlike,' Dufferin wrote to the

Governor of Bombay on 17 May 1885, 'but he seems to have got a bee in his bonnet.'

In the last week of 1885 seventy-two 'delegates' met for the first session of the Indian National Congress here in Bombay. It wasn't the first such attempt at national organization, nor for that matter was it particularly representative. The Indian Association had organized two 'national conferences' before the Congress meeting and anyway at the first session of the National Congress the prominent Bengalis of the Indian Association were not included. But by the 1886 Calcutta session the leaders of the Indian Association had joined Congress and this was the body that was going to survive.

For the first twenty years the Indian National Congress remained a moderate body, content with asking for less than self-government and demanding political rights, as the great moderate Congressman Gokhale put it, 'not for the whole population, but for that portion of it as had been qualified by education to discharge properly the responsibilities of such association'. Curzon's decision to partition Bengal had the effect of strengthening the extremists in Congress: with the advent of Gandhi around 1919 Congress once again changed its character. In 1920 approximately fifty seven per cent of the All India Congress Committee was urban, by 1923 this had dropped to 34.6 per cent. Dufferin's opposition had taken to mass politics, had moved out of the debating chamber.

In 1947 the opposition became the new Raj. Gandhi, who did not attend the Independence Day celebrations, advised that the Congress party be disbanded, but few Congressmen were interested in such sacrifices. So the Congress party lived on, changing its character as the nature of politics changed in India, evolving new ways of winning the next election.

The other parties, both to the right and the left of the Congress, formed the opposition. Occasionally they would capture power in a state but in Parliament they never added up to much. As a watchdog, the opposition was all bark and no bite. In the mid-sixties academics like Morris Jones and Rajni Kothari coined the expression 'one party dominance' to describe the Indian political system, and the phrase seemed to stick. Optimists have often predicted that this dominance would eventually wither away as it did in Turkey in 1950, and the popular agitation in the mid-seventies followed by the Janata government was cited as evidence of this. But as the last two polls have shown, this was just another hope.

Theoretically there is a job in parliament which carries the designation 'Leader of the Opposition', but in order to qualify for it one must belong to a party which obtains at least one-tenth of the seats in the lower house. In the eighth parliament, which opened last week, as in the seventh, that position is vacant. What is worse, this time round many leaders of parties, in particular Janata's Chandra Shekhar and BJP's Atal Behari Vajpayee, have lost their seats.

The opposition Rajiv now faces is from the Sikhs, in particular the Sikh terrorists who are waiting to strike. For if lunches don't come free, nor do governments. The barbaric reaction to Mrs Gandhi's assassination was exactly what the terrorists wanted: every time Hindus burn innocent Sikhs in the street and the government just sits back watching the blaze, more and more moderate Sikhs turn extremist. Last Wednesday, only hours after the Speaker of the lower house was elected in Delhi, with 'both sides of the house hailing his choice' as the newspapers put it, terrorists in the Punjab pumped three bullets into the head priest of the Akal Takht, one of the few Sikh leaders who had openly condemned terrorism.

Congress was founded a hundred years ago to legitimize political opposition in the country, perhaps even—as Hume believed—to create a safety valve so that the pent-up frustrations of the people could be released in orderly talk. It is one of the many ironies of India that it is the overwhelming success of that very experiment that has eventually led to the extermination of the opposition and to the emergence of terrorism. During the election campaign Jagjivan Ram, a veteran of the Opposition, remarked: 'Mr Gandhi is trying to make history without even reading it,' to which quip Rajiv is supposed to have replied with the equally pat: 'One does not have to read history to make it.' Perhaps not. But I fear most of his problems in the coming months will result from the attitude behind that remark.

The Spectator
26 January, 1985

PM's Press Aide

If there is a pedigree that counts in our capital today it is certainly Doon/St Stephen's/Cambridge. True, King Rajiv himself skipped out on Stephen's (founded 1881, today a college in Delhi University) but he did put in appearances at both Doon (founded 1935, today our foremost public school) and Trinity, Cambridge where he spent his time listening to Stan Getz records and bedding an Italian language student called Sonia. His best friend, former Cherry Blossom shoe polish executive and grandson of the Maharajah of Kapurthala, Arun Singh managed to squeeze in some time at St Stephen's between Doon and St Catherine's, Cambridge. Today he is minister of defence planning and Rajiv's closest aide (at least he was till his wife Nina had a row with Sonia). Another close friend of the King, Suman Dubey, traipsed through Doon/Stephen's/Cambridge then briefly taught Economics at Stephen's before becoming a 'safe' journalist. Last month he became youngest-ever editor-in-chief of all eleven editions of the *Indian Express*, our largest circulation daily (his wife Manjulika has not yet rowed with Sonia). But it's not jobs-for-the-boys that interests me this week, rather the career of Mani Shankar Aiyar, the PM's press aide.

Unlike the immaculately well-bred Rajiv, Suman and Arun ('the Kashmir House gang') Mani is an incorrigible loudmouth. As a young radical at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, he used to wear his Doon School blazer to tutorials till his tutor pointed to the birdbath embroidered on his breast pocket and asked what it was doing there. 'It is the lamp of learning, Sir.' 'A pity they didn't light it for you,' came the prompt reply .

A pity, indeed. Fired by an envy of those who were even more privileged than himself and unrestrained by good sense Mani became a communist. In a recently published poem, *Home Truths*, Delhi's very own Thribb confessed: 'So, as I fretted that adolescence/Into painful manhood/I plotted revolution:/Swore by Marx/(But no, never, by God) That coiffures/Shall be laid to dust/And layered sandwiches/Shredded to the ground.'

In 1962 China invaded India and while we (ineffectually) fought the yellow bastards and our wives knitted sweaters and donated their jewellery for the nation's defence—this privileged asshole romped about the Backs as General Secretary of the local Communist cell *raising money for the Chinese!* In a just world he'd have been strung and quartered the day he came back home; the world being what it is, Mani had the gall to apply to join our foreign service.

The police—reasonably enough—considered him a security risk and handed the examining authorities the file on him; Aiyar's family pulled strings and the President finally intervened to ease Mani's entry to the service.

During Operation Bluestar, Mani was handling propaganda at the external affairs ministry and, though married to a Sikh writer, was the one responsible for circulating around the world videos telling the most blatant lies about the Operation ('not a single bullet fired upon the temple' etc.). For his services—and, doubtless, his connections—he was rewarded soon enough. After Rajiv took his place on the throne Mani was given the job of protecting him in the international media.

It must be said that Mani has done a good job of this. (*Time* has interviewed Rajiv thrice: Mani keeps pestering them for a fourth interview.) Occasionally, though, his boorishness gets the better of him. Last June, the day Rajiv arrived in Washington on a state visit, Mani got pissed at the press briefing and viciously began to rile the assembled hacks ('Why do you want to cover the White House dinner. .? Do you want to dance with Nancy?' etc.). Rajiv may flirt with the Frank Approach but his frankness is a far cry from Mani's: 'The only reason we have anything to do with the Indian press,' Mani once told an incredulous journalist, 'is because they come from the same socio-economic class as us.' (Mani's brother, Swami Aiyar, another Doon/Stephen's/Cambridge man, is the *Economist's* Indian correspondent.)

Private Eye
16 May, 1986

The New Hypocrisy

'Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue.'

— La Rochefoucauld

Some years ago in New York I met and immediately liked Jim Micheals, the editor of *Forbes*, a prominent American business magazine. Though Micheals is not commonly known as an 'India expert' he has followed political and financial life in India since the forties when he lived here during the war and just after.

Last year when Jim Micheals was here, during one of our interminable discussions about the connection between finance and politics in India, he suggested I read a book by Fritz Stern called *Gold and Iron*. He said it was a book all thinking Indians should read.

Gold and Iron is a study of the relationship between Bismarck and his Jewish banker, Bleichroder. It was a relationship well-known to Germans in the late nineteenth century, yet since forgotten. *Gold and Iron* is the first study of Bleichroder. 'For a long time the memory of Bleichroder was an embarrassment,' writes Stern, 'he represented so many lingering taboos—money grabbing, influence peddling, Jewishness. It may be a pardonable exaggeration to say that Bleichroder is everything that has been left out of German history.'

Bismarck, himself, began the process of excision. Despite a close association of thirty years and hundreds of letters exchanged Bismarck did not once mention Bleichroder in the first two volumes of his memoirs.

Yet without Bleichroder, Bismarck would not have been a fraction as rich as he was. Bismarck was an aristocrat, a banker, but not a very rich one. In the 1830s, debts—both family and own—had forced him out of a bureaucratic career.

In 1859 Bleichroder entered Bismarck's service. Bismarck was at the time ambassador to St Petersburg and interestingly enough in the beginning it was Bleichroder who sought 'insider' information. But soon this relationship developed into something mutually beneficial. Bleichroder used his financial expertise, often even his finances to enrich Bismarck; Bismarck, in turn, gave Bleichroder privileged information through which the Jew could make *profitable investments*. Stern writes: 'The idea that power should be resolutely unprofitable, that public and private interests might be incompatible because the latter might corrupt the former, did not occur to Bismarck or to other 19th century giants.'

In this article it is not my intention to suggest that Rajiv should follow Bismarck, that employing insider information for private gain is ethically preferable to taking commissions. That is the subject of another article. Here I am making a plea for realism.

It is often remarked that India is an exceptionally hypocritical country. When it comes to financial matters I have rarely found this to be true. Indeed there is a great openness, an openness you begin to appreciate when you go to countries like Zimbabwe and find people scared to talk about changing a hundred dollars illegally in case their servants overhear and report them. In India everybody likes to discuss scandals. Laugh, joke, scratch beneath the surface and people's complicated financial arrangements come tumbling out. I have found this is as true of politics as it is of business. (Before I sat to write this article I spoke for an hour—off the record—with an Indira 'loyalist'. 'I don't know who's been telling you this nonsense about Swiss banks. We never kept money in Swiss banks. When a deal was done abroad the businessman who got the commission gave it to us here in India in cash.')

That was the old party. Rajiv promised to change things. Either he never meant the promise, else he learnt very soon that you cannot fight elections on fresh air. In consequence, whatever else its problems, the party was never short of funds. When V.P. Singh fought the 1980 elections in UP he was quite content to accept party funds without examining what shade of black they were.

Then came the new hypocrisy. The same V.P. Singh decided to turn 'honest'. 'I have never collected funds,' he would say in self-defence. He was content to eat the meat but blame the butcher.

I do not find it incredible that so many people—in the press and out of it—have been taken in by this hypocrisy. It is as if the people are always waiting to be fooled. In 1984 a party with blood on its hands was given the largest ever mandate by the people. They made an extraordinary fuss about a man who struck me as nothing more than an amiable duffer when I subsequently met him.

These same people are now busy making a fuss about V.P. Singh whose chief associate is Arun Nehru. Congressmen who 'know' find it incredible that the people can believe that Arun Nehru is somehow 'okay'. I am told that Nehru is soon to be 'exposed'. As soon as V.P. Singh announces his forum of likeminded people interested in cleaning up the country and Arun Nehru takes a prominent place on it, the disclosures will begin.

It will be Arun Nehru getting a taste of his own medicine. For the past six months it is obvious he has played a winning game, that of implicating Rajiv by releasing dirt on those around him, Satish Sharma and Amitabh Bachchan in particular. Now the Congress party has finally decided to make Arun Nehru V.P. Singh's Amitabh Bachchan.

Journalists welcome all disclosures but I shall welcome these particularly as I have got sick of the hypocrisy of the middle classes who, corrupt and wont to cut corners themselves, feel a powerful need for a mahatma to preside over the miserable petty corruption of their own lives. Arun Shourie, Rajiv Gandhi, V.P. Singh: it is a catalogue of illusion.

As for the Congress(I) party in Delhi, one can sense an upbeat mood. In the past two months there had been panic and depression, especially when rumours about the late Maino's (Sonia's father) estate were spread, but now the party seems convinced that whatever Rajiv has done his name will not be attached to it.

Most of the elation, of course, has nothing to do with Bofors and disclosures. It is the victory of the old guard that is being celebrated.

Through late 1985 and well into 1986, Rajiv Gandhi was racked with the problem of dissidence in the party. These were the old dissidents afraid that the new man had too many new ideas—and new advisors. There was talk that no one over forty-five would be given a ticket for the next Lok Sabha and it understandably upset many. But these people did not come out in open rebellion.

Such people had nothing to do with Arun Nehru or V.P. Singh who are the new dissidents. Some journalists have attempted to suggest that the old dissidents will back the new dissidents and that this will result in the eventual downfall of Rajiv Gandhi. On inspection, the situation in Delhi seems very different.

The fact is that in the last three months it is neither Rajiv Gandhi who has won nor the new dissidents. By weakening Rajiv's position the new dissidents have forced him to come to terms with the old dissidents, the old faithful of the party. Is the old guard now likely to ditch Rajiv and opt for Nehru and Singh? Hardly likely. It has taken them two-and-a-half years to tame this man. They are in no mood to inherit the obstinacy of V.P. Singh or the arrogance of Arun Nehru. (For them it has been a charming denouement: half of Rajiv's disliked friends are busy finishing off the rest of Rajiv's disliked friends.)

Myself, I do not care for that victory. But I hope that the new hypocrisy abroad will be exposed, that people recognize V.P. Singh is either a fool or a liar when he says, 'I have never asked for money. I don't intend to.' The relationship between politics and finance is complicated enough. Let us not cloud it further by pretending that some Bismarcks do not need their Bleichroders.

The Sunday Observer
9 August, 1987

The Plot to Oust Rajiv

Rajiv Gandhi's father was never an establishment man. As a Congress backbencher Feroze Gandhi was forever critical of his father-in-law's government; thirty years ago, he was responsible for unearthing the biggest financial scandal that embarrassed the Nehru government, the Mundhra Jeep deal. It is inconceivable that such a man would remain for long in Rajiv Gandhi's Congress party: he would be bundled out unceremoniously.

In 1952 Feroze Gandhi became the general manager of the *Indian Express*. It was a typical combination. Founded in 1932, the *Express* has always been a paper of dissent; its owner, Ramnath Goenka, a fiercely independent if idiosyncratic press baron. Though close to Nehru and the Congress party—of which he had been a member since his teens—Goenka stubbornly preserved his independence from the government of the day.

Almost always, that is—there have been periods when the paper has come around to see the government point of view. In 1982 Goenka sacked his executive editor, Arun Shourie, the most passionate investigative journalist in the country, whose disclosures on the Kuo oil deal had recently embarrassed Mrs Gandhi's government. Then in 1986 it appeared that the ageing Mr Goenka had finally lost his teeth. In a documentary, 'Rajiv's India' he informed the visiting Jack Anderson that he was satisfied with the Prime Minister. 'If I die tomorrow,' he said, 'I will go a happy man because the country is in safe hands.' Around that time he appointed as editor-in-chief of the *Express* the Prime Minister's best friend, a cautious journalist called Suman Dubey.

Seven months later, in February 1987, Dubey was joined at the *Express* by his charismatic brother-in-law, Arun Shourie. Apparently all was forgotten, all was forgiven and Shourie was back as executive editor as if nothing had happened. But while Dubey chose not to write for the paper, Shourie was raring to go.

The Indian President, Giani Zail Singh, felt ignored and humiliated by Rajiv. Approaching the end of his term he had decided to have a showdown with Rajiv. To this end he chose an unpopular bill that had come up to him for his assent—and sat on it. If passed, this piece of legislation would have given the government considerable powers to search mail. For his first big story in the *Express* Shourie used material leaked from the Prime Minister's office revealing that Giani Zail Singh had intended to introduce a precisely similar bill when he was home minister five years earlier. Whatever one thought of the Mail Bill, the President came out looking like an unprincipled manipulator.

At a time when it was an open secret that the President and the Prime Minister were locked in terrible conflict, I remember the President's press adviser, Tarlochan Singh, obligingly doing a breakdown of the major dailies for my benefit: 'The *Times* is mine, the *Hindustan Times* is half mine, the *Hindu* is mine, the *Statesman* is mine, only the *Express* is theirs.'

But the main campaign the *Express* was conducting all the while had nothing to do with either Prime Minister or President. S. Gurumurthy, the financial adviser to Goenka, published twenty excellently researched articles which alleged that Reliance, a huge textile manufacturing corporation, had bent innumerable laws to great financial advantage. If anything, the articles were too well-researched: a great number of them quoted verbatim confidential government files—and even supplied the registration numbers of the files.

Then suddenly, on 13 March last year, two things happened that changed forever the cosy relationship that seemed to exist between the *Indian Express* and the government. That morning all eleven editions of the *Indian Express* carried on their front pages the text of a letter the President had written to the Prime Minister. It was no ordinary letter. In it the President accused Mr Gandhi of lying to Parliament, and of ignoring his constitutional responsibilities towards the President. The publication of the letter in the *Express* precipitated the most severe constitutional crisis in independent India.

Later that day, as a part of searches being conducted in other parts of India over violations of the Official Secrets Act,the Central Bureau of

Investigation raided the *Indian Express* guest house in New Delhi. The first floor of 130 Sunder Nagar is no ordinary guest house: it is the Delhi residence of Ramnath Goenka and S. Gurumurthy.

The CBI claimed that the searches were conducted in order to locate the 'stolen files' that Gurumurthy had used for his articles; the agency was acting against violations of the Official Secrets Act. On the ides of March, however, nobody in the Indian press was prepared to believe them. That day's *Express* alleged intimidation and an assault on the freedom of the press. Most of the country bought that line. The *Express* once again became the Prime Minister's principal critic.

It was widely rumoured at this time that V.P. Singh the former finance minister, had engaged an American detective agency, Fairfax, in his campaign against economic offenders, in particular against those who held illegal funds abroad, and that this detective agency had come up with evidence against Amitabh Bachchan, the most popular actor in the country, a Congress MP and, best of all, a close friend of the Prime Minister. (Other rumours suggested that Fairfax had uncovered Rajiv Gandhi's own illegal bank accounts.) There were two problems with these rumours: one, while it was clear V.P. Singh had retained Fairfax there was no evidence that Fairfax had dug up anything against Bachchan or Gandhi. Two, these rumours were being levelled as serious charges in Parliament.

The *Express* went to town on this. Suggesting that it was the information Fairfax had ferreted out that had led Rajiv Gandhi to move V.P. Singh from finance to defence in January, Shourie now publicly proclaimed Rajiv Gandhi's 'guilt'. Quoting Burke on the evil good men do when they keep quiet he urged V.P. Singh to tell all.

On 12 April, V.P. Singh resigned his ministry. The very next day an editorial appeared on the front page of the *Express* urging the President to 'act'—i.e. to dismiss Rajiv Gandhi—and, presumably, to replace him with the good Mr Singh. British readers will notice the similarity with Cecil King's famous editorial in the *Daily Mirror* of 8 May 1968 'Enough is Enough'; for many Indians it was the most dangerous editorial published in independent India. The soft-spoken editor-in-chief, Suman Dubey, was not enamoured of it; within days he resigned and Arun Shourie took over his job.

In March 1987 the combined circulation of the eleven editions of the *Indian Express* was 588,000. By August—with Shourie filing away almost every week on page one—it had risen to 685,000 and had overtaken the *Times of India* as the largest circulation paper in the country.

'Rajiv is our best circulation manager,' Shourie was quoted as saying, and it was true. Everything the government did helped the *Express*.

On 1 September the directorate of revenue intelligence decided to raid the *Indian Express*. On the basis of the documents they seized during their searches, a number of prosecutions were initiated against the *Indian Express* for violating the Customs Duty Act and the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act. The directorate went so far as to release documents which seem to suggest the *Indian Express* management had been guilty of underinvoicing machinery while importing it, a familiar scam to avoid paying full duty.

Within days Goenka made a statement in which he unwittingly admitted he had violated the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act. Ordinarily you would have thought this would have embarrassed the self-righteous *Express*, which was waging a battle against such corruption. On the contrary the raid was seen as yet another attack on the freedom of the press. Ramnath Goenka claimed he was being persecuted and even supporters of the Prime Minister thought the government was going too far.

In October there was a strike at the Delhi edition of the *Indian Express*. A minority of employees prevented the overwhelming majority from going to work by means of violent picketing. This too was blamed on the Congress party, who, it was said, had engineered the strike. Perhaps it was true, but as with many of the hypotheses the *Express* advances there was not enough proof to back the charge.

Right in the middle of the strike the government acted again. The Land and Development Office went to court and instituted a suit against the *Indian Express* with the intention of recovering their premises in New Delhi. Further, it instructed the *Express's* tenants not to pay rent.

Legally the *Express* appeared to be on weak ground but morally this was the last straw. When the government instructed the tenants not to pay rent the cry went up that it was trying to kill the *Express* financially. This was followed by a flurry of reports in November that the government was going to take over not just the *Express* building but the *Express* itself. 'By now the assault on the *Express* is as brazen as it was during the Emergency,' Shourie wrote.

The *Express* cartoonist had Rajiv exulting, 'Daddy was the general manager of the *Indian Express* in 1952—now in 1987 I've taken over—what's wrong with dynastic rule?'

If we leave aside the Emergency there have been three traumatic years in modern Indian politics, years that deserve special study: 1969 when

Mrs Gandhi fought the old guard in Congress and won: 1979 when Morarji Desai lost the Prime Ministership: and 1987. There was no split in the ruling party last year, nor did the Prime Minister tumble but both were distinct possibilities. Who was planning all this? Was it just the President? Because India is such an open society where everybody talks, the truth will ultimately out; for the moment we have to be content with the evidence we have, evidence that suggests the *Express* was not just an innocent commentator but an active plotter.

Remember the President's letter to the Prime Minister of 9 March which started Rajiv Gandhi's troubles last year? Remember the CBI raid on the Express Guest house in Delhi on 13 March? Well, during those searches a preliminary draft of the President's letter bearing handwritten corrections was found. The handwriting was thought to be that of S. Mulgaokar, the editorial adviser to the chairman of the *Express* group. Late last year a photocopy of this letter came into my hands. Before publishing it I telephoned Mr Mulgaokar. At first he declined to see me but when I told him I had the photocopy he said, 'I do not know which draft you have, the first or the second, but yes, I had marked certain corrections. . . .I am neither ashamed nor embarrassed.'

Others were not so sure. Two days after my piece appeared the *Times of India* commented on this in a full page editorial, 'A Murky Affair'. The next day Mulgaokar replied on the editorial page of the *Express*. It was a sad performance by the grand old man of Indian journalism. Yes I did it, he seemed to be saying, but I am proud I did it. Why didn't he tell his readers about his involvement when he commented on the matter in the *Express*? And why didn't the *Express* reveal its involvement when it published the President's letter as a 'scoop'? Mr Mulgaokar said 'I told one and all it was my handiwork.' Yes, but when? After the CBI had unearthed the document. And whom did he tell? There was no record of his admission in the public prints till I got hold of the photocopy. One can only conclude that there was something Mr Mulgaokar wished to conceal.

What was that secret something? Mr Mulgaokar tells us he did not know the President, that he was approached by 'a friend'. Who was that friend? And what was the preliminary draft doing in the *Indian Express* guest house, a place he had no reason to visit except to call upon Messrs Goenka or Gurumurthy? Were they involved in this matter?

I have asked these questions in the Indian press but Mr Mulgaokar won't tell. When the editor of the *Times of India* commented on this matter, saying plainly that Mr Mulgaokar had not told the whole truth, he received a short letter from Mr Mulgaokar. 'Of course I have not. I have told the truth only insofar as it relates to my part in the Zail letter to Mr Gandhi. But in so doing I have had to stop short where I might be giving up other people's confidences.' Well, well.

Nor will the former President tell. Before I published the draft, however, I told a friend, the editor of *Sunday* about it. He sent a correspondent to meet Giani Zail Singh who gave her an account of how a reporter from the *Express* accompanied by 'that advocate' came to see him in early March and suggested they send him a draft of the letter. Who were these people? Singh says he can't remember, something that is difficult to swallow. Was the 'advocate' Gurumurthy? After the publication of the draft Giani Zail Singh is now no longer available to the press.

The questions remain. At any rate Mulgaokar appears not to be the author of the conspiracy, merely the sub-editor. But the close links that Goenka, Shourie and Gurumurthy have with the Hindu right-wing opposition cannot be discounted. Zail Singh was clearly in on this. Was V.P. Singh? And what was his reaction? In Hugh Cudlipp's memoirs, there is a marvellous account of the meeting he arranged between Cecil King and Mountbatten in the first week of May 1968. King went through a shopping list of Wilson's defects and then proposed that Mountbatten take over after the 'coup'. Mountbatten was silent for a while, then asked Solly Zuckerman what he made of this. Zuckerman was curt. 'I think this is rank treachery and you should have nothing to do with it.' Then both men got up and left. Sadly I cannot imagine a Zuckerman in the Indian version.

The Spectator
6 February, 1988

Fleet Street's Blind Eye

If you rely on newspapers for news you are unlikely to have heard this story. Over a month ago, the editor of a Sikh paper in Southall was killed by two men who threw petrol bombs into the office of *Sandesh*, the weekly he worked on. But the *Times* didn't think the event worth reporting. Not, for that matter, did the *Guardian* or the tabloids. All that appeared in the national press was a single sentence in the *Daily Telegraph* of 3 August: 'Mr Kartar Singh Tar, aged 60, the victim of an arson blaze at a printing works in Southall, London, 10 days ago, died in Mount Vernon Hospital yesterday.' Is this to be the first of a series of Sikh killings? Have the battles of the Punjab spilt over into London? The *Telegraph* didn't say.

Before it was bombed *Sandesh* was written and printed in seven rooms of a flat grey factory in Dilloway Lane, a short access road that leads off a busy Southall street to a yard, an engineering works and a garment factory. Opposite the grimy Victorian factory, in complete contrast, stands St Anselm's Church, a sixties job, the colour of pale mud. Shortly after three in the morning on 24 July a lady living in the presbytery heard the sound of glass being smashed, woke and saw two turbaned men 'of Asian appearance' running away from the scene. She alerted the police who rushed to find the office blazing, and Mr Tar inside, unconscious, on a bed. He had been working late and had decided to sleep in the office. Nine days later, on 2 August, the doctors finally switched off his life-support machine.

Kartar Singh Tar was an Indian who had come over last October to help edit *Sandesh*, one of the four Punjabi magazines in Britain. Tar had spent his life in education: last year he retired as principal of a college in Banga in District Jalandhar in the Punjab. At this point the owner of *Sandesh*, Ajit Sat Bhambra (who had been a student of Tar's back in the early fifties) invited him to help edit *Sandesh* and arranged a work permit. By all accounts Tar was not interested in politics,was widely respected by the community in Southall and did a good job at *Sandesh*: within months he had changed the image of the paper and injected a new life into it. So what went wrong?

It is Bhambra, the owner of the paper, who attracted the flak. His views on the army action in the Golden Temple have made him unpopular. He blames the government for not acting earlier but, given the delay, sees the army action as inevitable. 'We outsiders knew that the

CIA and other such bodies were involved, that many of the extremists were smugglers. Why didn't the government take action earlier? But on 1 June there was no alternative but to go in and cleanse the temple.' It isn't a line calculated to endear him to the more emotional Sikhs.

In the past few months Bhambra and his employees received several threatening letters and phone calls. A typical letter reads: 'Take whoevers' side you want but don't leave the truth aside. . .We are watching you and you are still not changing in the right direction.' Another, signed simply *Guru ka khalsa* (the Guru's army): 'I advise you to apologize because that will be better for you. Otherwise pray to God about your death and mine.'

Bhambra did not apologize for his moderate views, did not change his stance. Instead, he handed the letters over to the police. And Tar, who couldn't care one way or other about politics, died.

In a recent issue Bhambra has reprinted a leader from the *Sun* along with an appeal to the Sikh community to stop mucking about in Britain:

> ***The* Sun *has a warning for the Indian people in Britain***
>
> You are well liked. You have made a splendid contribution to the life and culture of this country.
>
> Your enterprise and initiative in the corner shop are much admired.
>
> *But a minority, spurred on by the tragic events in the Punjab, seems bent on bringing violence on to the streets of our cities.*
>
> ***If you want a holy war, go back to India and fight it there.***

Does he think there will be more murders? 'The extremists could strike again but next it could be our homes. This is how it started in the Punjab when they shot Lala Jagat Narain, editor of *Hind Samachar*, two years ago.' Outside Bhambra's home a young bobby sits on guard duty, studying a map of Southall.

Sandesh has never been soft on the Khalistanis. Last year on 26 May it carried a photocopy of a letter by the US Senator Jesse Helms acknowledging that the self-styled leader of Khalistan, Jagjit Singh Chauhan, had been 'assisting' him. It was a scoop and a damaging one to Chauhan. The Indian papers picked it up. 'That was the first time my paper was taken seriously in certain quarters,' said Bhambra. I did not read his implication. Which quarters? The Indians? 'No. The people who are feeding Dr Chauhan. There are powerful people in Britain who are backing him.' And in view of the threats, bullying him to write in favour of Khalistan, it is the Khalistanis whom Bhambra suspects have burnt his office.

In the office of the Siri Guru Singh Sabha Gurudwara, which flies the Khalistan flag and smiles on Dr Chauhan, there is no sympathy for Bhambra. Bayant Singh, the general secretary of the temple, gives me a cunning look. 'Anyone could have done it. How do we know? It could have been an outsider. It could have been Bhambra. It could have been an agent of the Indian government itself.' We talk for two hours; suspicion and insinuation reign. When I leave the *gurudwara* a man in a red striped shirt who was listening follows me down. He tells me he is a social worker in Nottingham. 'You must not take everything they say seriously. These people aren't properly educated. Southall is a lot like India, these people live in a make-believe world, a dream world, full of myths.'

Make-believe or otherwise, *Desh Pardesh, Sandesh's* rival weekly, is more direct than the temple manager. On 27 July an item in the paper quoted Jagjit Singh Chauhan as saying that the office was burnt down by Bhambra himself, in order to collect insurance money. Bhambra sued for libel. The next week the paper quoted unnamed people saying: 'Another was supposed to die—someone else has died in his place.' Bhambra sued for libel: this time counsel felt criminal libel might be appropriate. And on 10 August the paper carried two items, one quoting a Khalistani Didar Singh who alleged that the identikit portrait of the offender the police has assembled resembled Bhambra himself, the other quoting someone who claimed that some four hundred Indian intelligence men were in Britain working as *agents provocateurs*. And it was one of these agents who had set fire to Bhambra's office.

While in Southall I tried to meet Purewal, the editor of *Desh Pardesh*. An intermediary secured an appointment, Purewal failed to keep it. A few days later I rang him to ask a few questions. But he was adamant. 'No way am I going to talk. The question doesn't arise.' Why not? 'The matter is *sub judice*.' This is nonsense, the matter only becomes *sub judice* once someone is charged. I tell him that, he merely repeats himself. 'No way . . . . .'

The Khalistani flag does not fly atop Khalistan House in Baywater. ('It's a residential area,' they explained, unconvincingly.) Inside the stuccoed front of 12 Talbot Road is the office: a decorative desk with no papers on it and a reception suite. There is an air of unreality everywhere, even the map that hangs above the desk does not recognize Khalistan. (It wouldn't: it is the *Daily Telegraph Map of the World.*) The furniture tries to be plush, with little success. Dust collects on the green velvet upholstery of a mahogany repro sofa, awaiting the world leaders who are to be received here. (Later, in the tattier bedroom, a head pokes in, asks in rapid rustic Punjabi: 'What did we say in the last letter to China?' The leader, wearily: 'God knows. Don't know where these boys keep the copies.')

I was received in the bedroom. Dr Jagjit Singh Chauhan wasn't feeling too well so he stayed in bed, wrapped in a pale yellow nylon duvet with a brown floral pattern. 'Yes, I suppose you could say we won a lottery on 6 June. Before that we did not have much support in Britain. But now every Sikh supports us, almost every Sikh.' What does he have to say about Tar's murder? 'This has been done to discredit us. The Khalistan movement has passed several resolutions that we will not engage in violence in Britain. My theory is that the Indian government has done it to give us a bad name.' From out of the duvet emerges a stump instead of a hand. He notes my surprise, smiles, and goes on talking into my tape recorder. 'Fifty-three Khalistan supporters have been detained for questioning but the police have found nothing.' And later: 'Our boys have been treated very badly by the British police, in fact this police behaves worse than the Indian police.' It is at this point I find it difficult to take him seriously.

The question remains: why didn't the press report this killing? Bhambra is forthright, if fantastical. 'Dr Chauhan, the Khalistan leader, killed the story. Powerful people in the British establishment back him, find his cause attractive.' I rang the news editors of both the *Times* and the *Guardian* to get their reasons. They asked for time, I gave them two clear days and a week-end to find out.

John Price of the *Times* had this to say: 'I've been through all our records of the relevant dates: stories we received from both freelancers and news agencies. We had no copy. Had we had copy we'd have certainly used it.' Peter Cole of the *Guardian* said much the same. ('We were not aware of it. Had we been . . . .') But there was a problem here. Bhambra said he had rung the *Guardian* on 24 July to tell them of it, someone had taken down the details. After that, he said, a 'female reporter' from the *Guardian* came to Southall and investigated the story. A few days later, when nothing appeared, Bhambra rang the *Guardian* again to ask what had happened. The reporter said she had handed in her story but it was the editors who decided what would be carried.

I got Bhambra to ring the *Guardian* to refresh their memory. It had an effect. Cole now said: 'Scrub that earlier quote out. Use this instead.' He then gave me a long piece of untidy waffle full of general principles which included a plug for the *Guardian*. This was the relevant bit: 'In this case there was a somewhat suspicious fire. At that time nobody had died and it seemed like many somewhat suspicious fires. The story didn't get in on that day and then it was another day.' It wouldn't do, and I told him why. Either his reporter had investigated the story or she hadn't. This new reply assumed she had. If so, why did this fire 'seem like so many suspicious fires'? Cole saw the point and asked for more time: 'Ring me at 3.30.'

When I rang, he said: 'Ring again at seven.' When I rang him back things weren't much better. He said he had checked with some of his women reporters but still couldn't be sure.

I don't think Chauhan killed the story. Journalists are often incompetent, newspapers often fail to carry the stories they should. But is there something more in this than just routine incompetence? What if a white person had been killed? And what if the very same incident had occurred near Fleet Street in central London rather than in the distant world of Southall politics? I suspect it would have merited a mention. Will this be the first of several killings among the Sikhs in Britain? Perhaps the press will keep its eyes open the next time we get a signal.

The Spectator
8 September, 1984

The Delhi Riots: 'Now the Tears Have Dried Up'

On the ninth of November when a senior minister's wife turned up with two hundred blankets at the refugee relief camp set up by Sardar Mehtab Singh by his house in Karol Bagh's Ajmal Khan Park, things weren't quite as smooth as she would have liked. 'We accorded her whatever reception was required', the organizer's son recalled, with what I took to be a faint touch of irony, 'but the volunteers who had been working here since the camp was started, they were all agreed that no government assistance should be accepted.' This seems to have been a fairly standard response: all over Delhi volunteers and residents of camps have reacted this way to what they perceive to be the government's callousness in delaying aid. One volunteer made a similar point about the Congress party: 'The Congress says we haven't organized the riots. OK. But then tell me, when calamity like this occurs all workers of all parties come to help. Where have the Congress partymen gone?'

The minister's wife, it appears, 'felt a bit bad and small'. Understanding the reaction of the volunteers she asked the organizers if she could do anything. Would they like to meet her husband? Could he be of help? They went to see him the next day. To their surprise, perhaps, she confirmed their stories of Congress involvement. She had been visiting various camps and had picked up enough information. 'If we had one name, the minister's wife and PA confirmed many others.' The minister seemed convinced.

Later, at the same meeting, the camp organizers asked the minister to do something to restore Sikh confidence in the government and the ruling party. It was important, they said, that those who had incited and led the mobs, be punished, both in the courts and with expulsion from the party. Now it was the minister's turn to plead his woes. 'Confidentially', he is reported to have said, 'in this government my own position is not clear. Till I get close enough to Rajiv how can I put your case to him?'

For political Delhi the riots might never have occurred. As speculation over who would be favoured with Congress tickets grew this past week, no other concern was manifest. I dined at the home of one such Congress hopeful and the chatter of party district presidents and city presidents graced the table. At one point a guest who had nothing to do with the Congress party mentioned the riots. The host rose to the occasion, '*Haan, woh jo Jan Sanghiyon ne kiya, haan*' (Yes, that which the Jan Sanghis did) and the sentence trailed off. I protested and my protest was carried—but only because a joint secretary of the party who was present came up with the most guilty hang-dog expression I have ever seen. I may be naïve but I am convinced that this was the first time since 31 October that our host had begun to understand the complicity of his party in the riots. [If you read only the *Times of India*, the *National Herald* and the *Patriot* and mix with the right people, such blessed ignorance is only to be expected. After dinner, and after the assistant inspector of police who had read the party hopeful's hand had left, we asked what predictions the palmist had made. *'Kehta hai ke chance bees percent badh gaya hai'*. (He says that your chances have increased twenty per cent.)*'Pehle kya kehta tha, kya chance tha*?' (What did he say your chances were earlier?) the district president inquired. And the serious reply: *'Pehle kehta tha sau percent chance tha ticket ka, ab kehta hai sava sau percent chance hai.*' (He said first that I had a hundred per cent chance of winning a ticket, now he says I have a 125 per cent chance.)]

Earlier that day I had spoken to a friend of mine in the opposition, a fairly important party aide. I had sympathized with him about the new situation and then (in my innocence) said that at least they now had a proper issue to fight the election on: who had started the Delhi riots? His reply made perfect sense: 'Fight the election on this issue?' he said. 'Are you crazy? Go to the villages and they are saying *aur kyoon nahin maara Sikhon ko*? (why didn't they kill more Sikhs?) In Bombay and Delhi, if we are lucky, this will count; in the press, amongst the intellectuals. In the rest of India, no way. It will backfire and people will say *achha kiya Congress ne* (the Congress did well). What can we do in such a country?' So at last I knew why the Congress party hopeful didn't need to know about the riots.

'The tears have dried up', Jaspal Singh said to me at his father's camp at Ajmal Khan Park. After 12 November the government representatives who used to come by regularly stopped coming. Even the response of the Indian press they had found disappointing. With very few exceptions, most of the reporting had been slanted and had tried to play down the impact of the riots. 'Many reporters used to come here and take down details of cases, but after a few days when the people in the camp saw that none of their stories were appearing in the papers they stopped talking to the press. "What's the use?", they said.'

The administration, however, has begun to throw its weight. Class I officers from all public sector undertakings have been deputed to report on what can be done. There are many suggestions in the air. Since the residents of colonies like Trilokpuri do not wish to go back ('Do you want us to go back and live among those who killed our fathers and raped our sisters?') it was suggested to the government that it exchange those plots for others of the same size in other colonies, preferably colonies where several Sikhs could live together in comparative safety. The government's first response to this suggestion was: right, surrender your land first. The residents of the camps were willing to do so but the organizers intervened and said they would only countenance exchange of plots, not immediate surrender. Another suggestion that has been made is that the government allocate alternative plots and free cement to those whose houses have been damaged and get the able-bodied among the refugees to start building their own dwellings. 'That will keep the men busy', said a Sikh camp organizer to me. 'When the men are idle who can say what their minds will turn to? So far we have forbidden them from any slogan-shouting, not even *Bole so nihaal* within the camp, but if they are unemployed for long who can say?'

Young Sikhs have begun comparing the position of their co-religionists with that of the Jews and have begun thinking in terms of kibbutz-style dwellings. But kibbutz-style protection works both ways. Certainly those within the kibbutzes will be more protected in the event of another such carnage but those who choose to live apart will be ever more vulnerable.

Several Sikhs have begun contemplating building a new colony to resettle the refugees. Tilaknagar and Fatehnagar have been discussed as possible sites. But it is not enough to build houses; many of the people who have fled from their homes have lost their means of survival as well. So there is talk of setting up small state industries in the new colonies, knitting and *papad*-making. But for any such industry to succeed marketing institutions are required.

The horrors of the riots remain, a permanent legacy. Resettlement can only be a partial reparation. Those who are involved in the resettlement are constantly reminded of this. 'Yesterday Mr Seth, an assistant labour commissioner who has been attached to us,' Jaspal Singh of the Ajmal Khan Park camp recalled, 'came with us to the Trans Yamuna area for a survey to identify loss of life and loss of dwelling units. He had three colonies to visit. He could only go to three houses and then he broke down and cried. He said: "It is not possible, I can't go on. Just fill in the forms, you confirm them and I'll sign them." We were in a house where the women were going about their work and there were ashes and bones all around. You see, the men had not yet returned and there was no one to clear the *phul*.'

The Sunday Observer
25 November, 1984

The Posthumous Reward for Moderation

When it all started in the late 1970s, it was a case of Sikhs killing Sikhs— Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale's militant faction locked in conflict with a group it regarded as heretical. Then Sikhs killed Hindus. Then Hindus killed Sikhs. With last Tuesday's assassination of Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, the moderate Sikh leader, by two Sikh extremists, it is Sikhs killing Sikhs once again.

But it is not back to square one.

Mr Longowal was the third leader to die in the triangular conflict, and the least charismatic. Each of the three died a violent death. Mr Bhindranwale was killed when the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple in June last year. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by Sikh guards last October.

All three leaders died when they thought they had achieved a position of strength. Mr Longowal's death came less than a month after he negotiated a peace accord with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Mr Longowal's publicity people introduced him to the press as the 'dictator' of Sikh agitation. Since he spoke no English, it is reasonable to suppose he was unaware of the associations of the word. He was the unlikeliest of dictators.

The guardian of a Sikh shrine in his home village of Longowal (hence his name), he emerged in regional politics for the Akali Dal party in the latter 1960s. A soft-spoken, unimposing man, he made no impact. But in 1975, during the Emergency, the party leadership was in prison and someone had to step in. Mr Longowal did just that.

He was never a fighting man. At the beginning of the Amritsar agitation in 1982, I asked him what he thought of the Farsi verse in which the last Sikh guru legitimized the use of the sword if all other means had failed. He smiled. He would not resort to violence, he said. He would rather the Sikhs sacrificed themselves to the enemy's violence.

Events dwarfed him. When in 1982 he should have isolated and resisted Mr Bhindranwale, he embraced the militant preacher instead, hoping thereby to contain him. Mr Bhindranwale had been created by the Congress party, specifically by Sanjay Gandhi and Zail Singh, the present President of India, who were both in the opposition then and on the lookout for a Sikh religious figure they could use to electoral advantage against Mr Longowal. The Akali Dal was conducting a peaceful—if ineffective—agitation in Patiala over the river waters dispute. When Mr Bhindranwale called up his own irresponsible agitation from the Golden Temple, Mr Longowal muttered to an aide, 'What is this dead snake they have put around our neck?'

That was the time to shove off the snake, to challenge Mr Bhindranwale when he was not yet a popular leader, to cement Hindu-Sikh ties that Mr Bhindranwale was undermining with his sectarian propaganda. Instead, Mr Longowal moved his own agitation to Amritsar, joining forces with Mr Bhindranwale.

To be fair to Mr Longowal, it is a difficult job being a Sikh moderate. The Sikhs are a fighting people and their struggle has always been against the authority in Delhi. Whoever is seen as betraying the cause is pulled down. Banda Singh Bahadur, the courageous guerrilla leader, has never been forgiven his surrender to the Mughals in 1715. In 1962 the Akali leader, Master Tara Singh was dropped for breaking a fast unto death for a Punjabi-speaking state the year before.

Mr Longowal lost face when he surrendered to the army in the Golden Temple battle. After his release last February he travelled in Punjab trying to make extremist noises and win acceptability. It was a ploy that the government covertly endorsed. Occasionally he went too far, notably when he honoured the family of one of Mrs Gandhi's assassins. That earned him the wrath of the Indian press, which was fooled by his pretended extremism.

The real extremists were not fooled. Piqued by his posing, they pulled out Mr Bhindranwale's octogenarian father and set him up as a rival leader to Mr Longowal. In May, asked to settle a dispute in the Akali party, the old man hijacked the sixty-five-year-old party from under Mr Longowal's nose. Dismayed, Mr Longowal appeared to want to opt out of politics. At this point most people gave up on him.

But he was persuaded to return and he rose to the situation. At a time when no other leading Sikh politician was prepared to sign a deal with the government, he did. What convinced him was his belief that most Sikhs in the country were tired of agitation and of the obloquy of being regarded as subversive citizens. He calculated that they would welcome the pact, and he was right.

With a few obvious exceptions, Sikhs all over India heaved a sigh of relief, and the press made him a hero. 'The dramatic accord,' wrote a Sikh columnist, 'is one of those historic moments which help a nation recover something of its natural, moral rhythm after a radical breach in its tone and tenor.'

The extremists have struck but it was not Mr Longowal they wanted. It was the peace accord with Rajiv Gandhi that they wished to kill.

The central government has delayed the elections in Punjab by three days, to 25 September. Those elections may have to be delayed much longer. But whether or not the peace accord survives, it was not a futile exercise. Something has been won.

No Hindu mourned the death of Mr Bhindranwale. Few Sikhs mourned Mrs Gandhi's death—and even if they did, they did not dare attend her funeral for fear of losing their lives. Mr Longowal may have been the least charismatic of the three but his death has been mourned by Hindus and Sikhs. His funeral last Wednesday was attended by both communities.

Hindus and Sikhs are coming together. That is the achievement and the reward of moderation.

The International Herald Tribune
27 August, 1985

II. PUNJAB

Heresy in the Punjab

Barnala (population 28,000) is a small, dirty town in southern Punjab, the sort of place people come from rather than go to, the headquarters of a subdivision of district Sangrur, one of the twelve districts in the truncated Punjab. The constituency for the state legislative assembly, a 'semi-rural' one, is larger: there are some 80,000 votes here. But even that's nothing much: there are another 116 constituencies in the state, all equally large.

This time round the constituency has been invested with a particular significance. A month ago Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, the moderate Sikh leader, was assassinated in Shepur, a village only one and a half rupees (ninepence) away from the town if you take a bus. And his successor as the leader of the Akali Dal, a sixty-year-old lawyer-politician, Surjit Singh Barnala, is (as his name suggests) a Barnala boy who's made good. The most heavily guarded man in India after Rajiv, Barnala is the Akali candidate from Barnala. In these elections the Akalis are fighting Sikh Congressmen but their real enemies are the Sikh extremists who want the polls boycotted.

I came here on Sunday, the penultimate day of campaigning, in a jeep full of saffron-turbaned boys. Among the Sikhs saffron is the colour of sacrifice and by the mad logic of the Punjab today it's the terrorists who are making the biggest sacrifices. But these boys weren't terrorists, at any rate they weren't terrorists on duty. They were courteous, soft-spoken supporters of Baba Joginder Singh, Bhindranwale's father and the leader of the breakaway United Akali Dal which is urging people to boycott the elections. (They don't consider themselves breakaway: the jeep flew two flags; one was a faded Akali pennant, the other a black flag with the word 'boycott' spelt out in white Gurmukhi letters.)

Baba Joginder Singh was to address a meeting in Barnala's constituency that day, very much a rival meeting as Barnala was going to address another meeting at the same time only seven kilometres away. Whenever we passed a group of villagers the boys in the jeep would scatter printed copies of a photograph. In several villages I saw children fight for these, the photograph had become a collector's item, there were young boys who had collected fistfuls. The photograph showed the Akali candidate for the parliamentary constituency of Sangrur, Balwant Singh Ramoowalia, bowing before a man in a white turban, about to touch his feet. The man in the white turban had his hand raised, as if to bless. My neighbour in the jeep, a Ludhiana landlord who had made his money manufacturing agricultural implements, laughed. 'This is the most damaging photograph we could have got. The man in the white turban is Gurcharan Singh, the last leader of the Nirankaris. Ramoowalia was taking his blessing.' I know the Nirankaris are considered a heretical sect by most Sikhs, in fact Bhindranwale began his career in the late seventies, locked in conflict with the Nirankaris. Even so, my neighbour's enthusiasm seemed absurd.

He went on: 'Someone once asked Ramoowalia about the photograph. You know what Ramoowalia said? He said something had fallen on the floor, he was picking it up. Picking it up, the man said! If he was picking it up then why was the Nirankari's hand raised? Ha ha ha ha ha.'

To be fair to the people of the Punjab, weightier issues obsess them, but this is a good indication of what really moves extremists in the Baba Joginder Singh camp: a violent hatred of heresy and a disgust for the slipperiness of politics. But the rest of the Punjab is not as interested in such matters. The children in the villages may collect these 'embarrassing' photographs but Ramoowalia will almost certainly win his seat in Parliament.

I spoke to Baba Joginder Singh before he went onstage to address the gathering. His supporters, riding tractors and trolleys, were shouting in the background: *Bhindranwale aaoonga, Khalistan leyaaoonga* (Bhindranwale's going to come, he's going to bring Khalistan). 'You heard what *they're* saying?' he said, a smug smile spreading across his face. 'No, I'm not saying it, they're saying it.' Did he still think Bhindranwale was alive? 'Yes.' What government would he prefer, an Akali one or a Congress one? 'A government of truth, justice and righteousness.' (Most of his replies were this kind of pious waffle.) What did they want from the government? 'We want nothing. Only beggars beg.' What were they fighting for? 'Our rights.' What rights? 'We'll speak to the ones we're fighting with, when *they* want to speak to us.' His supporters all around us cheered.

There were some 3,000 people at the meeting, almost all of them Sikhs. Each of the speakers reminded the audience of last year's massacres in Amritsar and Delhi, urged them to swear by the *Guru Granth Sahib* that they would boycott the elections which were anyway a friendly match between Longowal's Akalis and Rajiv's Congress. But the most frightening part of the proceedings were the songs at the beginning, when two women stood at the mikes and belted out the refrain: *Amar rahen Satwant Singh Beant Pyaare* (May the loved Satwant Singh and Beant live forever). Satwant Singh and Beant Singh, you will recall, were Indira's assassins. The armed members of the Punjab police just looked on.

Meanwhile in Barnala proper Surjit Singh Barnala was being feted by the town's Hindu merchants. At one point he was weighed on stage in coins. ('They'll woo him with their notes, these *lala* merchants,' a local Sikh journalist muttered to me, 'but it's a secret ballot and you never know what they'll do with their votes.') A young Sikh who had been shot twice by Sant Longowal's assassin came on stage and displayed his gunshot wounds. The merchants garlanded him with fifty hundred-rupee notes strung together with a length of thread.

On the surface it looks as if there is much Hindu-Sikh amity, but, as the cynical journalist pointed out, such public displays may well be a form of insurance. Surjit Singh Barnala could easily become the chief minister. As in most other parts of the Punjab voters in Barnala have divided on communal lines, the Sikhs supporting the Akalis and the Hindus, Congress. It's ironic, this division, especially since the leaders at the top have so obviously colluded to enable the Akalis to (by fielding weak Congress candidates against many Akalis) form a government in Punjab.

Later that afternoon I sat in the pilot car in Barnala's motorcade as it sped towards Faridkot district, where he was to address an election meeting. There was an open jeep full of guards, three Morris Oxfords with Barnala in one surrounded by personal bodyguards, another two with just guards, another jeep. All necessary perhaps but there was an element of make-believe in the arrangements. 'Hello kilo eight, hello kilo eight, Barnala Sahib has left.' 'Hello alpha two, alpha three calling, alpha three calling, over.' The black flag that flew on our car had the word 'pilot' embroidered on it in red.

Over two hundred men guarded Barnala as he spoke in Faridkot. As with Rajiv's rallies there was a distance of fifty feet between the podium and the front row. Four bodyguards with rifles stood round him as he spoke. The audience did not look very enthusiastic, in fact a lot of them left as soon as he began to explain how the peace accord has won Punjab its capital, Corbusier's Chandigarh.

Apart from the police Barnala's personal security is being handled by his son, a slick young man who wears a yellow cravat, white trousers with zips at his knees and a pistol in his hip pocket. 'I'm an industrialist,' he explained to me. It is he who is responsible for the fantastic house Barnala has built on the outskirts of the town, a raw concrete mediaeval English castle complete with crenellations and battlements.

There's a metal detector at the gates of the castle and scores of policemen hang around. Secure inside this fortress, Barnala found some time for me. 'I did try to get Baba Joginder Singh to join us but it was too late. Once they had taken a stand (to boycott the elections) they were not going to change their minds.' Did he feel threatened by the boycott, by Baba entering his constituency today? 'No, but the boycott can only help Congress. It will draw away Akali votes, not theirs.' Of the past he was less sure. What did he make of Bhindranwale? I asked. He refused to answer. 'He is not an issue in this election. I am not here to discuss history but the elections.'

Barnala will win his seat and his party should form a government later this week. But history will remain at his heels. Bhindranwale does not need to make a second coming. Baba Joginder Singh or no, Bhindranwale is in the air and will remain there for some time.

The Spectator
28 September, 1985

'We're Going to Kill You. You May as Well Give Us What You Have'

Purshottam 'Poshi' Saini is a thirty-two-year-old contractor who lives in Pathankot. When I met him at Hoshiarpur Civil Hospital on Monday evening, twenty-four hours after the bus massacre, his right arm was in a sling, his room filled with visitors, Hindu and Sikh. Poshi was born in Gurdaspur district but he has spent most of his life in Pathankot and Hoshiarpur. He now plans to move to Delhi. He spoke to me in Punjabi, only occasionally breaking into Hindi or English.

I was travelling from Jalandhar to Pathankot. The bus left Jalandhar at four p.m. At about five p.m. it reached Tanda by-pass. At that time there were approximately forty-five to fifty passengers in the bus. At Tanda by-pass some twenty more people got on. Nobody knew *kaun*

Sikh aur kaun nahin (who was Sikh and who wasn't). We later learnt fifteen of them were from one family. After the by-pass I dozed off. Then the bus suddenly slowed down near Bhagola, fifty yards before the link road. At once slogans were shouted inside the bus: *'Bole so nihal: Khalistan Zindabad.'* (He who chants the name of God is blessed: Long live Khalistan.) With the slogans they created a kind of terror. Then the bus turned on the link road.

I was sitting almost in the centre of the bus, on the bench with three seats. I was sitting by the aisle at Jalandhar. I had initially taken the window seat but a couple boarded the bus and the husband requested me to let the lady sit near the window. I did not object.

As the bus turned to the right on the link road, the slogans increased. *'Sukhdev Singh Sakhira Zindabad,'* etc., etc. The bus went ahead a bit and then halted. Then they began shouting abusive slogans, using very dirty language.

The bus was overcrowded. I don't know how many of them were behind me but in front there were two. The man near the door started abusing again. He asked us to stand up. The bus stopped. The man standing near the driver turned to face us. At once he got his sten gun ready. He fitted the gun. He took hardly three seconds to do that. He was so well-trained.

After that they started the collection. *'Jo jo kuch hai de dyo bhai.* (Give us whatever you have, brothers.) We are going to kill you. You might as well give us what you have,' they said. Halfway through the collection the man standing by the driver said: 'Sikh, Mussalmaan and women come down.' There was a Punjab police constable on the bus, a Sikh in uniform. He was sitting on the seat bench opposite the door. He tried to object, make a bit of noise. They said to him; *'Maar dyo maar dyo, maar dyo.'* (Kill them, kill them, kill them.) They made him get off. The other Sikhs began to leave the bus and the cries and shrieks started. At that time we thought these are our last seconds, now we are going to die. As the people were waiting in the bus the bullets began to fly.

I thought: perhaps I can save myself by some means. The couple sitting next to me, I said to them, take God's name. As far as I could see, most of the women had left the bus but this lady stayed on, said to her husband, 'I will try to save you.' When the burst of sten guns started I crouched under the bench in front and tried to hide myself. The man sitting next to me was healthy. He could not fit under the bench so he threw himself on me. And his wife, she lay on top of him.

The sten gun fire increased and the cries in the bus grew louder though I don't think it was the people who were shot who cried—they died straightaway. A body slumped near my back. I feared it was dead. I tried checking by nudging it with my elbow. Just then we felt the bullets were being fired on us and one bullet entered my right arm. I still thought perhaps I could escape. As I thought this, the sound of bullets grew louder. My eyes were shut with fear, a second bullet hit my arm. Though my body was crouched under the bench my head was sticking out, on my head was this man's head and on his head was his wife's. I tried to pull my head in. I felt the man above me was very badly injured. Perhaps even dead.

Then the gunmen left the bus. There was quiet. All this firing could not have taken more than three minutes. Then somebody cried: 'Go and look in the bus in case somebody is alive.' Two persons entered the bus. The man in front fired what must have been a revolver shot. There were so many bullets on the floor of the bus you could tell from the vibrations just where the men were. The man who entered from the back came and stood exactly in front of me. I thought I was going to die.

He first tried to push the lady, she didn't utter a single word. Everybody was quiet. A portion of my back was exposed. The man behind me kicked me twice on my back. I gave him no response, I even stopped breathing. When they kicked the man lying on top of me, he said *'hai'*. They fired at him again. He died and two bullets from his body entered my arm.

For the next two or three minutes we kept quiet out of fear. Then I said to the lady: 'Please get up.' She said: *'Bhaisaheb*, how are you?' Then we looked for her husband, tried to lift him. There was a bullet in his forehead and blood spattered across his face. She began to wail. I checked his pulse and told her that her husband was dead. Then she said, *'Bhaisaheb* I too am injured. Please take me to a hospital.' At that time, on the bus we were the only ones alive—yes, there was another, the technician at the Dasuya Civil Hospital, he was breathing his last.

When I got down I saw there were four corpses, one at the door, another three in front of me. But I was no longer scared. What had happened had happened, there was nothing to fear now. Getting down from the bus I cried out: *'Mar gayyo e, bachao e,* hospital *pachao e.'* (They have killed us, help us, take us to the hospital.) There was a man in a tractor nearby but he did not heed our cries. The women whose relatives were caught in the bus climbed inside and started crying. At a distance in the village I could see people looking scared, running away.

By then four or five people from the village had collected around the bus. I asked them to pick up the six or seven corpses outside and load them onto the bus and that I would drive the bus to Dasuya. They were scared, of the police I suppose, and did not load the corpses.

The Sunday Observer
7 December, 1986

Bhindranwale's Escape

On Sunday, along with some 25,000 others, I went to pray in the Golden Temple between six and nine in the morning, the only hours pilgrims are allowed in. We had just had the first of the rains and the usually spotless *parikrama* that surrounds the square lake was covered with puddles and muddy feet. Solemn hymns filled the air as the crowd looked at the signs of damage all around. And in the middle of the grey-brown water stood the golden shrine, as if saved by a miracle.

Not completely saved though. The government boasts that not a single bullet was fired on the shrine are untrue. In a recent statement the Akali Party claimed there were at least three hundred bullet marks on Sri Harimandir Sahib and though I did not have the time (or means) to count them the figure seems plausible. All around the shrine, on the walls of the *parikrama* and the *Toshakhana*, the army has touched up and painted afresh the extensive brickwork. But no amount of white paint can cover the bullet marks on the marble and gold, and each morning as the packed mass of pilgrims pushes itself toward the shrine hundreds of hands stretch out to trace each bullet hole, to take in each defacement. Many Sikhs feel it is best to leave each bullet mark unrestored, a constant reminder of the storming of 5 June.

The *Akal Takht*, the temporal seat of the Sikhs, is badly damaged: the shell stands but some walls have collapsed, one of the two *chattris* is no more, only two of the several pillars on the facade remain. Pilgrims are not allowed in the building but from what one sees of the facade while visiting Harimandir Sahib it appears the building will have to be completely rebuilt.

Sikh tradition has it that *gurudwaras* cannot be repaired by just anybody, but by volunteers from amongst the faithful. So the Akalis have called upon the government to stop repairs (which amount to further desecration) and to hand back control of the temple to the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee by 15 July.

The legends have begun. The Sikhs in the countryside refuse to believe Bhindranwale is dead. Farmers have wagered tractors, combine harvesters and even land in support of their disbelief. At Bhindranwale's *gurudwara* at Mehta Chowk I was told that the final prayer (*antim ardas*) has not been said for him there. And when Sant Tara Singh of Chola Sahib, while performing an *ardas* for the martyrs, prayed for salvation for those who died and health for those who got away, it was clear what he meant.

The belief is that Bhindranwale is in Pakistan. A group of pilgrims who were in Lahore recently claim to have been blessed there by Bhindranwale. And each evening the faithful tune into Pakistani television to get a glimpse of the Sant despite the fact that his death was announced on it several days ago. On the night of Id (30 June) there was a strong rumour that Bhindranwale would appear on the extended programme Pakistan TV had arranged as part of the festivities. The fact that he didn't hasn't deterred anyone from believing he is alive and well though some now feel he left for America on the 26th.

A common account of Bhindranwale's escape goes like this: just before the army stormed the temple they sent in ten or twelve uniformed men, some of them Sikhs, in an attempt to persuade him to give up. Bhindranwale and his men captured these soldiers, put on their uniforms and escaped in their army vehicle to Pakistan. A variant has it that an empty army vehicle was found on the Indian side of the border in Gurdaspur District.

Those who cannot accept this implausible account are at a loss to describe his method of escape but conclude that some sort of escape is the only way of explaining the following alleged discrepancies: the span of Bhindranwale's hand measured nine inches while the post-mortem figure was seven; his height was 6'1", two inches more than that on the post-mortem report; the fingerprints of the body found don't tally with those of the police record; the body was clothed in *choodidaar* pyjamas but Bhindranwale was never known to wear pyjamas, preferring robes instead. The fact that the body was identified by several who knew him, his own brother included, doesn't seem to count for much. It must be said, though, that all the Akalis I have met are convinced he is dead. Indeed some go so far as to suggest that the rumours have been started by the government itself, in its attempts to soften the blow to the Sikhs.

The stories of Bhindranwale's escape are part of a wider problem of credibility. The Sikhs I met in the districts no longer believe anything that appears on Indian television or radio, or even in the Indian press. Everyone listens to BBC and Pakistan radio and the ban on foreign correspondents in the Punjab is viewed as yet another attempt to hide the truth. The press in the Punjab is censored, so accounts of army atrocities travel by word of mouth while the Hindu press is filled with stories seeking to establish the criminality of the terrorists. In an attempt to justify the army action to the Sikhs, each evening the government-controlled television brings on a train of Sikhs who speak out against Bhindranwale. But in the Punjab at least this has had the opposite effect on the community, which brands these tame Sikhs as traitors. As an old priest explained to me, 'Indira *Bibi* talks of a healing touch. What she doesn't realize is she is putting salt in our wounds.'

The Sikhs in the Punjab today are sullen and leaderless. When Khushwant Singh called the attack on the Golden Temple a bloody punch on the Sikh nose he was voicing the sentiments of his entire community. The destruction of the Golden Temple library and with it several precious relics is seen by them as a deliberate assault on their faith. Almost to a man the Sikhs speak of Khalistan, the Land of the Pure, their sovereign state. What they need now is a leader to take them there.

While all the Sikhs I spoke to are certain there will be a struggle, not all of them can be certain of victory. The cab driver who drove me in from the airport pointed out to me that the Nagas had been fighting the Indian Army since 1955. I replied that perhaps the Sikhs could not be thwarted as easily as the Nagas. He shook his head sadly as if to cancel my doubts. He had served in the Indian Army for thirty years and knew its might.

The Spectator
7 July, 1984

Bloodstained Whitewash

It is useful when reading the official report on the massacre of Sikhs following the assassination of Mrs Gandhi to remind oneself that Rajiv Gandhi's government is not the first to have resisted ordering an inquiry into a terrible massacre, or, having ordered it, tried to obtain a result more favourable to themselves. Mr Justice Mishra's report was submitted last July and was tabled before the Indian government in February. On 13 April 1919 the massacre of Jallianwallah Bagh took place; as late as 22 May, the secretary of state for India, Edwin Montagu, under pressure in the House of Commons, said in the budget speech, 'Let us talk of the inquiry when we have put the fire out.' A week later, the war in Afghanistan was over and the Punjab became peaceful. Now there was no reason to delay the inquiry.

The telegraph wires connecting Delhi to London buzzed with communications between Montagu and the viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, who expressed real reluctance. So we find Montagu imploring Lord Chelmsford not to adopt the view that the Government of India had to defend whatever had been done or that the inquiry had to whitewash everything. 'In that case we shall have achieved nothing and we shall have done more to embitter feelings than anything.'

If only this sound advice had been wired to *our* Government of India. In time, the Disorders Inquiry Committee 1919 was appointed with Lord Hunter, the solicitor-general for Scotland, as its president and seven other members: three British civilians, one British general and three Indians. Historians aside few today bother to read the Hunter Committee report; certainly it does not appear Mr Justice Mishra has.

The most horrendous evidence in the Hunter Committee report is contained in the cross-examination of General Dyer.

> 'When you got into the *bagh*, (park), what did you do?'
>
> 'I opened fire.'
>
> 'At once?'
>
> 'Immediately. I had thought about the matter and don't imagine it took me more than thirty seconds.' Since the general had admitted that a good many people in the *bagh* would not have heard the proclamation made earlier that day prohibiting processions or gatherings, Lord Hunter asked, 'Did it not occur to you that it was a proper measure to ask the crowd to disperse before you took that step of actually firing?'

> 'No, at the time it did not. I merely felt that my orders had not been obeyed. . .'
> 'Before you dispersed the crowd, had the crowd taken any action at all?'
> 'No sir, they had run away, a few of them.'

And later:

> 'Did the crowd at once start to disperse as soon as you fired?'
> 'Immediately.'
> 'Did you continue firing.'
> 'Yes.'
> 'After the crowd indicated that it was going to disperse, why did you not stop?'
> 'I thought it was my duty to go on until it dispersed.'

In reply to a question from Justice Rankin, Dyer went so far as to say, 'I had made up my mind I would do all men to death if they were going to continue the meeting.' But it was Sir Chimanlal Setalvad's cross-examination that really tripped up Dyer, who was rash enough to volunteer replies to hypothetical questions.

> 'Supposing the passage (into the *bagh*) was sufficient to allow armoured cars to go in, would you have opened fire with the machine guns?'
> 'I think probably yes.'

When it came to preparing a report unanimity proved difficult and the committee split on racial lines. Even so both the reports—the majority and the minority report—were published under the same covers. There was no ground to believe Hunter had headed a cover-up operation. Even the report of the Punjab sub-committee of the Indian National Congress drew freely on testimony given to the Hunter Committee by Dyer and others.

Mr Justice Mishra, alas, was too busy to cross-examine any of the prominent Congressmen against whom grave allegations have been made in the depositions: allegations that they instigated and organized the massacres. He had better things to do. When not making trenchant observations about the viewing habits of children ('They are more punctual than adults in viewing television programmes') he is busy quoting Mueller's eulogies about the spiritual wealth of India. When he has finished exhorting 'everyone in society . . . . to put in great efforts in the right line, first to stop the downward trend and then, raise the same up,' he busies himself with insisting that 'every Indian must feel proud to have been born in India'.

Must we? Certainly there is little in Mr Justice Mishra's report to justify such pride. Take the case of Mr H.K.L. Bhagat, the only member of the cabinet to have been implicated in the deposition before the Mishra Commission. The Mishra Commission had no intention 'of separately dealing with the case of Shri Bhagat'.

According to affidavits filed by at least five people, Mr Bhagat held a meeting at Congress (I) worker Shyam Singh Tyagi's home in Shakarpur on the night of 31 October where he directed them to kill Sikhs. Mr Justice Mishra waves away these affidavits with a single sentence: 'The evidence regarding what transpired at the meeting is scanty.' It will not do. We are later told, 'Some of the deponents were cross-examined and they have not stood the test while some have not broken down.' Well, what of the evidence of those who did not 'break down'? What attempt was made to obtain more information? Was Shyam Singh Tyagi questioned? His family? His neighbours? And most important why wasn't Mr H.K.L. Bhagat cross-examined? Mr Justice Mishra has thrown away one of the great opportunities of our time. (When approached by newspapers Mr Bhagat simply declines to speak.)

Instead we are given flimsy bits of circumstantial evidence and conjectures which, we are to believe, suggest Mr Bhagat's innocence: The lieutenant governor of Delhi said Bhagat rang him for 'assistance in the affected areas'. The omnipresent district magistrate said he did not see, 'any political leader moving about to support the riotous mobs'.

The Mishra report does, however, concede that there is no particular reason to disbelieve allegations against nineteen junior members of the Congress party. But that is not the only list of Congress leaders against whom allegations have been made. In the written arguments of the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee there is another list of thirteen senior Congressmen (including Mr Bhagat) against whom affidavits have been filed. Two of the men who submitted the affidavits against Mr Bhagat, Jagjit Singh and Saroop Singh, have also accused one of the nineteen, Shyam Singh Tyagi. If their accusations against Tyagi are to be believed, perhaps we should be told why their accusations against Bhagat are not to be believed.

Unfortunately, it's not just Mr Justice Mishra. What all this adds up to is a more important decline in Indian public life, a decline in the intellectual standards of our thinking classes. We are not satisfied with the government's version: what do we do about it?

Since its publication in November 1984, the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) report *Who Are the Guilty*? has been widely accepted as the definitive account of the 1984 massacre. But if we are to compare the Hunter report to the Mishra report it would be useful to compare this fairly flimsy pamphlet to the solid two-volume report produced by the Punjab sub-committee of the Indian National Congress in 1920. Volume two of this work contains 829 statements obtained by the committee, complete with names and addresses of those questioned. In comparison the PUCL report contains six. In the 1920 report we know who the accusers are. The 1984 report names sixteen politicians, thirteen policemen and 196 others as having been responsible in one capacity or the other for the massacre, but these lists are quite useless as we are not told who has made these allegations. In the sixty-five years since Jallianwalla Bagh an incredible shoddiness has infected the national intellect.

The Spectator
18 April, 1987

Punjab: Night Without End

I am a Punjabi, admittedly a diaspora Punjabi; I speak the language and since 1982 have made several tours of duty to the Punjab to cover the political situation there. Last year, I gave up the two bubbles journalists like to travel in—the rented car and the hotel room—and took to the roads in buses and trucks to stay with whoever would have me. In the last nine months I have travelled through most of the state in this slower, more sensible fashion, meeting hundreds of people and observing their lives rather than merely recording their opinions. (What people tell journalists in the first hour of acquaintance is usually rubbish, what they think the journalist *ought* to hear. This I have found to be a fairly universal rule and it explains why whistlestop journalism the world over is so incredibly facile. You have to stay a while to begin to observe.)

People often ask me what I think will happen to the Punjab. I usually ask them to read my book about my travels when it is published next year. I am interested in the concrete, the particular; the nuances of experience not the abstractions of trends.

This rarely satisfies my interlocutors, 'But when will all this end?' they ask impatiently. I am no soothsayer but when pressed for an answer I compose a nonchalant expression and say 'Oh, thirty years, forty years . . . the "Punjab problem" will go on and on.'

Much as I like Mr Rajiv Gandhi's smiling face I seriously believe this. I do not believe this present leadership is capable of solving the problems that plague Punjab. Further, and far more serious: I do not believe that the political culture of India is ever going to throw up a leader who can find a lasting solution to them. It's not that there are no people who could solve these problems; it's just that our political processes are not going to produce such leaders. Of all the leaders we have had in this century, I believe that one man could have easily won the trust of the hurt Jat Sikhs and brought them around. For many other reasons I would not like to live in an India run by Netaji Subash Chandra Bose but I feel convinced he would have been able to do this job; what concerns me here, however, is the fact that Indian political culture is never going to let a man like that take charge.

When people say that India is a democracy I understand what they mean but I think it's the wrong word they use. In terms of civil rights it is a joke to think of India as a democracy. All I have to do to demonstrate this is to go to the nearest police station and lodge a complaint that my camera has been stolen, dropping a hint that I think my servant or one of his friends took it. The servant—and, if he is not careful enough to 'confess', his friends—will be beaten and kicked at the police station late into the night. What the readers of *Imprint* enjoy are not, for the most part, civil rights but civil privileges; we do not get beaten in a similar situation because we look like people who know people who know the IG.

Nor, for that matter, is India a democracy, in that the people feel they have the government in their hands, that they have the power to change the government and get a significantly better one. Certainly not at the national level. Quite apart from the 'single party' dominance the Congress has exercised, our Lok Sabha constituencies are far too large for constituents to feel they have 'power' over their MP, and the sum of money required to run with a chance is so great that ordinary people no longer believe that they could ever join the circus.

And yet, in a very perceptible way, India is a 'democracy'. If there is any doubt one need only cross the border and visit our neighbours. The difference is this: in India we are allowed politics. Collective demands in India are mediated through politics. And for politics to have free play we have rights of assembly and expression. (To those unfamiliar with this Aristotelian conception of politics I recommend Professor Bernard Crick's admirable little book *In Defence of Politics* in which he defends politics from all competing heresies, even democracy.)

It is this peculiar Indian way in which politics are allowed free play that makes for our distinctive political culture. When our middle classes speak in a self-congratulatory way about our being 'the only democracy in the Third World', it is the existence of the political market-place that they allude to. It is the buying and selling of interests and privileges that we have perfected to a fine art. Some people have suggested that India has remained a 'democracy' because of her sheer size; it is impossible to run a sixth of mankind from a dictator's office. Perhaps there is something to this but even more important, the reason why politics has come to stay here is surely the *bania* mentality prevalent in most of India; the sheer practicality of such an approach.

Consequently political culture has come to acquire quite a few unwritten rules and methods: you tell a lie when you have to; rarely if ever, refuse to do someone a favour—it is permissible subsequently not to do the favour but you must always pretend that you tried. When involved in negotiation or agitation, if you see a vacant space, occupy it; when it becomes difficult to stay there, retreat. One could go on and on, abstracting from standard political techniques but I think you get the picture.

The basic premise of politics is that everyone has a price. The skill of the politician is to find out what the right price is. I hope I do not sound disapproving: it is, of course, a dirty business, but it's better than the havoc idealists have wrought and it is the best protection we have from totalitarianism. Hitler was an 'idealist'; just think how different things would have been if he had a price.

Politics may protect us from the righteous but it brings with it, its own problems. It encourages people to agitate in order to create for themselves political credit. So as to be able to negotiate you must make a nuisance of yourself, but only a limited nuisance, otherwise things might get out of hand. (Longowal belonged to a political culture and understood this principle; Bhindranwale didn't so he didn't recognize the limits. In consequence he could not be tolerated and had to be killed, even if it meant the Government of India had to send troops and tanks into the Golden Temple to achieve this.)

Good or bad, politics has worked in India for the past forty years with remarkable success. There have been three notable failures, though. One, the Naxalites. Luckily for the system, the Naxalites did not share an ethnic bond that would complicate matters once the state began to eliminate them in encounters. It is the other two exceptions that have proved more intractable: the hill tribals of the North-East and the Jat Sikhs of Punjab. I do not think it is a coincidence that both these groups are markedly different from the *'banias'* of the plains.

Something that most Indians have never understood is the way Bhindranwale—and his followers—considered himself morally superior to the politicians he dealt with. '*Bibi*,' he would say, referring to Mrs Gandhi, 'calls me a communalist. But she too is a communalist. If she can be communal why can't I?' In early 1984, towards the end of his stint in the Golden Temple he used to refuse to meet Longowal unless there was a tape recorder on, to capture their conversations. *'Too ikk gall kehenda hai, pher mukkar jaanda hai.'* (You say one thing then fail to keep your word.)

One could complain that Bhindranwale was wrong, that he was naïve and did not understand the necessary deceits of Indian political culture. But he is dead and gone, and complaining will not help us very much. What is more important is to realize that for the Jat—robber nobleman though he may be and morally defective in his own way—straight talk (*siddhi gall*) is of tremendous importance. We laugh at them in our jokes; what we are really laughing at is their inability to wholly grasp our subtle and devious ways.

In 1849 John Lawrence entered Lahore as commissioner. The British had finally taken the capital of the last Indian kingdom to put up a resistance to their rule. Within eight years the Jat Sikhs were at the centre of the British defence when the Hindustanis decided to mutiny. How did the British convert their foes into their most loyal subjects? (The canal colonies and the consequent prosperity of Punjab came later.) It is a question I would like the Indian political elite to try and work out. I somehow doubt if it ever will.

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'Longowal Invited Mrs Gandhi to Invade the Golden Temple'

The life of an Indian immigrant is almost invariably locked in vapidity, and in Britain—a country that is becoming duller and poorer by the day—this is especially so. It's a struggle to get one house after the other, the fifth shop after the fourth. Having left behind the sustaining sources of the home culture the Indian immigrant rarely allows the culture of the country he is in to nourish him. Faced with this problem, the stock Southall solution has been the video movie. 'We get them all before you get them in India: What more can we want?' But that is no solution at all. You cannot drink mother's milk from a six pack though I suppose it is eventually possible to delude oneself into believing that a can ofCoke is *'the real thing'*.

It is this vapidity that any satisfactory account of immigrant life must come to terms with. *Tandoori Nights*, the first Indian sitcom on British television, fails in this respect and in consequence itself becomes vapid. In contrast, *A House for Mr Biswas* succeeded brilliantly because it exposed that very vapidity through the vision of the central character who spent his life dreaming of a liberation from the dullness he was heir to. (Viewed in such a context even dullness becomes vivid.)

It is this vapidity of washing machines and discount reception suites that must be understood when we consider the antics of the British and Canadian Sikhs. Dullness, rootlessness and a sense of guilt that one has, in some way, let down one's people by coming away—it is these that make them clutch fiercely at the political fantasies that come their way.

Khalistan is the most powerful of these fantasies. By this I do not mean to say that one day Khalistan will not come about. It may well, this week's 'historic accord' notwithstanding. But even if it does it will have little to do with the Khalistan that is being dreamt in Southall and Birmingham which is nothing but a vicious destructive fantasy designed to lend meaning, to lend purpose to the otherwise vapid lives of the Sikh immigrants here who are no longer satisfied with home video movies.

One has only to meet Jagjit Singh Chaunan for a few minutes to realize that he is living in cuckoo land. I first met him last year at Khalistan House at 12 Talbot Road, a run down stucco-fronted house in a once genteel part of London that is now infested by impoverished journalists, prostitutes, and West Indians. His office had a decorative desk with no papers on it. There was an air of unreality about the entire place. Even the map that hung above the unused desk did not recognize Khalistan. (It wouldn't: it was the *Daily Telegraph Map of the World.*) The furniture tried to be plush with little success. Dust collected on the green upholstery of a mahogany sofa, awaiting the world leaders who are to park their bottoms on it. [Later in the tattier bedroom, a head poked in: *'China noo pichli chitti vich kee likhya see?'* (what did you write in your last letter to China?) Chauhan replied wearily: *'Rab janne. Pata nahin munde kaapiyan kithe rakhde ne.'* (God knows; I wonder where that boy keeps the copies.)]

I was investigating the death by arson of a moderate Sikh journalist in Southall. Chauhan was full of fantastic theories. 'Maybe the Indian government killed him.' I was busy taking down his improbable conjectures when he said something that convinced me he was living in an imaginary world. 'Our boys in detention have been treated very badly by the British police. In fact this police behaves worse then the Indian police.'

Last week Chauhan was up to similar tricks imputing villainies to his immediate enemy and whitewashing the role of the other enemies in an attempt to appear 'reasonable'. 'This pact was really arrived at a long time ago.' When? Before Longowal's release? 'No, no,' he said to me with the air of a man who is making up his whoppers as he goes along, 'before Operation Bluestar.' What reason did he have to believe that? 'Mrs Gandhi was a mature person who had great respect for the Sikh religion. Why should she have invaded the Golden Temple otherwise? Longowal and Badal invited her there, in order to get rid of Jarnail Singh so that the feudal clique could sign a pact with the government, sell out the peasants'interest.'

In the newspapers he had described the pact between Rajiv and Longowal as a 'sell out'. Which part of the pact did he disapprove of? 'Every part. It doesn't touch the fundamental demands of the Sikhs, it only deals with the after-effects of Operation Bluestar, tries to heal wounds.' Surely that was laudable, the healing of wounds? 'Doesn't really heal any wounds, puts salt on them.'

'The Anandpur Sahib resolution wants Khalistan.' No it didn't, not when I last read it. 'You don't understand. Khalistan is the name of a part of a country.' You mean just another state, a bit like the states of the American Union? 'Yes, with its own flag like the American states. Three things: *Nishaan, Vidhan, Pradhan*. All the states have got new names, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, new names. Punjab is no longer Punjab, not even a Doab, therefore its name should be changed to Khalistan, the land of the Khalsas, and it should get financial autonomy.'

Is that all Chauhan has wanted when he has spoken of Khalistan? 'No, no, no. I want a separate state. The thing is, Mr Bhagat, that we are all from the peasant class. We have been tricked by all these commissions and everything. We are not going to get anything out of these commissions India has set up. Sant Longowal? I am afraid for his life.' Hasn't something *been won*? 'Mr Bhagat, when we talk of something we lose the whole. Actually, something has been gained. It is a big gain for the Indian politicians, this settlement. First, it was a case of the Sikhs fighting India, now it is a case of Sikhs fighting Sikhs. But even that is good. The infiltrators in the Akali party who have been there for the past sixty-two years, they were placed by the British, they have been exposed.' Which infiltrators? 'The feudal clique. Badal, Baldev Singh's family.' Would he be planning to come back and fight or is he going to merely give interviews in London? 'I will come, when my time comes. Let the whole issue be thrashed out among the Sikhs. Then I will come.'

I cannot see Chauhan ever returning to India. I see him growing older and older giving rambling interviews like this one, finally dying one day in his brown and yellow floral nylon duvet by the small fridge stocked with cartons of black cherry yoghurt juice made in Holland. The problem with *gurudwaras* in India, as an immigrant Kaur once complained, is they don't have Kleenex with which to wipe your hands after you've eaten the *kada parshad*.

The day after the accord was announced in India I went to Southall. The Militant Gurumukhi magazine *Desh Pardesh*, edited by Purewal, had brought out a special issue denouncing the accord. There was Chauhan in it and there was Talwinder Singh Babbar, the highjacking man still in Canada. *'Gaddaran de gale jutiyan de haar paavangehe'* he was quoted as saying (we will garland the traitors with shoes). After informing readers that he had sent Rs 40,000 to Satwant Singh's father he continued: *'Babbar phaji modan ge.'* (The Babbars will return the blows.) There was another *bayaan* by Bhai Lakhbir Singh, a cousin of Bhindranwale's. All of them said much the same thing.

I spoke to Parminder Singh, the general secretary of the Southall branch of the International Sikh Youth Federation, the Bhindranwale organization. 'Why aren't you happy with the *samjhauta*?' I asked.

'What more demands do you have?' He was frank, and revealed himself in his frankness: 'We have no demands We don't want anything from the Indian government. We are fighting for Khalistan.'

Among the *Kesari Paguri* boys at the Singh Sabha Gurudwara on Havelock road that is much the attitude. On the streets, it depends who you talk to. I did meet an old gent called Tara Singh Ragi, a building contractor who supported Longowal but then he explained that he belonged to Shiromani Akali Dal UK presidium, a pro-Longowal body that is trying to resist the boys, without much success. The Singh Sabha Gurudwara which the boys captured a few months ago from Bayant Singh, a crony of Chauhan's whom they have accused of embezzling funds, doesn't like the accord, doesn't think it will last.

In Washington last month I met and spoke at some length to Maj Gen Bhullar, the chairman of the World Sikh Organization, the very gent *The Illustrated Weekly* a few months ago suggested was heading the training of Sikh guerillas. I do not think he wanted Khalistan. He is a man who sees his mission as one to moderate and educate the more exuberant Sikh in India on what he wants. 'If they want Khalistan I will abide by that, if they want to remain in India I will want that.'

The young Canadian Sikh in the plush conference room we were speaking in butted in. 'The WSO is quite clearly in favour of Khalistan. That is the policy.' General Sahib tried to back out of a confrontation but I persisted. But the general stuck to his guns: All he wanted was peace and goodwill at home, whatever was good for the Sikhs.

It was not difficult to see why the two differed. The Canadian, I soon learnt, was in construction and was making pots of money: He had no desire to return to the Punjab which he saw as a dirty place without conveniences. General Bhullar, not being an immigrant, was keen to get home. He has a house in Chandigarh and wishes to get back as soon as possible, away from the vapidities of Washington, and the fantasies.

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III. CONTEMPORARY INDIA—MISCELLANEOUS

Single-Horned Dilemma

The charging rhino is a ubiquitous symbol in Assam. Assam Oil, Assam State Transport Corporation, All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad: what unites the three organizations at first sight is the stark outline of the massive herbivore in its characteristic pose, its ridiculously small eyes set with manic determination, its single wild horn intent. It is well-known that graphic designers are often unaware of the eventual meaning of the shapes they play with but the AAGSP poster men could hardly have hit on a more appropriate symbol: the rhino's charge can be fatal, but the vegetarian he is, the rhino charges intending only to defend. (Riding through Kaziranga on an elephant, the rhinos I saw at the reservation were ageing listless beasts who reluctantly moved out of the way, ribs protruding out of their weathered hides, clapped out masses of flaking grey.)

Despite the agitators' threats the government insists the poll is definitely on, scheduled for 14, 17 and 28 February. Last week 477 nominations were filed for the state's 126 constituencies and thirty for the twelve Lok Sabha seats that were not contested in 1980. But these figures and their unreal normality give no idea of the complicated situation in the state today, no idea of what is going to happen when the rhino begins his charge.

Elections, if they are held, will be held, under peculiar circumstances indeed. For the past two years preventive orders under Section 144 have been in force; ever since elections were announced earlier this month press censorship has been imposed and most of the leaders of the popular agitation imprisoned. The electoral rolls have not been revised since 1979, thereby denying a vote to the estimated six lakh citizens who have attained political majority since 1979. And it is a certainty that several thousand foreign nationals are on the electoral rolls when they have no business being there. Estimates, admittedly partisan, reckon that these foreigners comprise some twenty per cent of the electorate.

When in doubt, consult history. Bengalis from what is today Bangladesh have been pouring into Assam for most of this century. Traditionally they were economic migrants from overcrowded Mymensingh, peasants who availed themselves of the wide, fertile spaces of the Brahmaputra valley. C.F. Mullan, superintendent of the 1931 Census in Assam, warned about this 'invasion of a vast horde of land hungry immigrants' but nothing much seems to have been done about it.

Partition complicated matters. The Muslim economic migrant was joined by the Hindu religious refugee. The Constitution (in Articles 5 and 6) gave the intending migrant till 26 January, 1950 to make up his mind but the door was kept open by executive order till 31 March, 1958. In response to further communal frenzy in East Pakistan the Government of India opened its borders to Hindu refugees from 1 January, 1964 till 1 April, 1965. But at all times, whether the door was officially open or shut, a steady stream has made its way into Assam. And in the past few years the entire state has woken up to this migration. Hence the problem.

Why wasn't anything done about it earlier? Well, things were done but half-heartedly, or at any rate, ineffectively. The Line System was introduced in 1920 with the intention of restricting immigrants to areas the Assamese were unlikely to require. It was a policy with a double edge: while containing the 'immigrants' to certain areas it also legitimized their presence there. The Colonization Scheme (early twenties) tried to control the sale of land held by Assamese on annual leases to 'immigrants'. Today the Assamese see both these policies as exercises in land endowment not restriction. In 1946 several tribal blocks were created. The massive inflow after Partition led to the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act 1950, which was intended to arm the government with powers to remove from Assam any person or class of persons whose stay in Assam was 'detrimental to the interests of the general public'. It was a response to popular disaffection at the surge in immigration. But the Act specifically stated that nothing in Section 2, the vital section, 'shall apply to any person who on account of civil disturbances or the fear of such disturbances in any area now forming Pakistan has been displaced from or has left his place of residence' etc.

The government has from time to time made noises about this migration (eg., *Influx*: *Infiltration from East Pakistan* produced by DAVP August '63, a paper which sets out the position with a rare clarity) but little has been done about it. Quite apart from the genuine difficulty in patrolling the border with Bangladesh there are other reasons for this neglect. Some of its considerations have been humanitarian, but there is much to suggest that there was more than altruism to its policy.

Over the years substantial Congress vote banks have been created in Assam by putting illegal immigrants onto the electoral rolls. Again, this is nothing new. In the thirties and forties the Muslim League

Prime Minister Saadulla did just that by importing Muslims from across the border. During the Second World War Saadulla's anxiety to bring in droves of Mymensinghis as a part of the 'Grow More Food' campaign prompted Wavell to note in his journal that the Prime Minister was engaged rather in a 'Grow More Muslims' campaign. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed is said to have kept this tradition alive. As a result several pockets of the Goalpara and Darang districts north of the Brahmaputra are solidly Muslim.

Fifty years ago the water hyacinth was not to be found in Assam. The story is told of two Mymensinghis who had quarelled with each other. One went to his village by the native Padma and brought back with him when he returned to Assam a small cutting of the indestructible weed and threw it in his neighbour's paddy field. Today the water hyacinth threatens to choke the Brahmaputra. The important thing about this story is not that it is true (as with much apocrypha it's difficult to tell, but it probably isn't) but that most Assamese who tell the story do *believe* it is true. It's indicative of the image the Assamese has of the Mymensinghi.

The Bengali Muslim may be the nasty uneducated peasant out there but not so the Assamese Muslim. From Bakhtiar Khilji onwards the Muslims from the mainland tried to conquer Assam from the Ahoms seventeen times but each time they were repelled. But they didn't leave without a trace. The Assamese Muslim is the mark they left behind, but unlike the Muslim in some other parts of India he has assimilated with the predominantly Hindu population remarkably well. Partly because they were forced to marry Hindus, their marriage and death rites closely resemble the Hindu ones. Such anti-Muslim feeling as there is is not directed against them.

These days, more than the Muslim even, it's the Bengali Hindu that comes in for the most stick. Nibaran Bora, the old socialist (recently expelled from the PLP which was his baby, and now partyless) put forward a plausible explanation. Arabic is the language of the Koran he said, 'but the language of the Muslim is the language of the land he lives in. So the Muslims who have settled in the north Brahmaputra valley have integrated into Assamese society linguistically'. The Bengali Hindu, on the other hand, when he finds his identity threatened seeks to preserve his culture and his language. So the Muslims have not sent their children to Bengali schools, but wherever pockets of Bengali Hindus have emerged Bengali schools have invariably sprung up. Of course, it's perfectly legal to teach one's children Bengali in Assam, but it doesn't make for good mixing.

Many feel it's the Bengali Hindu's failure to integrate with the Assamese that caused this trouble to surface. But who are the Assamese who are agitating? Though support for the agitation has come from all parts of the state (except from the Bengali Hindus) the backbone of the agitation is the caste Hindu orthodoxy which felt increasingly powerless after the '72 election when the tribals and others won a major share of the government. So when they speak of Assam for the Assamese it is not absolutely clear which Assamese they refer to: the plains tribals have not,on the whole,supported the agitation; some I have known are working to break it and others are sitting on the fence. (A few years ago they had wanted a state of their own—Udayacha—but now that demand has died down.)

During the 1972-73 medium of instruction agitation, the foreigners issue had figured on the list of demands but it had received little prominence. In 1975 the Government of India issued instructions to the government of Assam to take steps to detect the names of foreigners on the electoral rolls. Nothing much seems to have been done.

In 1977 as the Emergency ended the foreigners issue was raised once again, this time more prominently. A regional party, the Purabanchaliya Lok Parishad (PLP) was formed with the express purpose of ridding Assam of its immigrants. At first several groups wanted all non-Assamese to be expelled but after a while it was decided that a joint front be presented against the presence of non-Indians only. Meanwhile at the conference of chief electoral officers at Ootacamund in September 1978, the chief election commissioner, S.L. Shakdher, warned about the large-scale inclusion of names of foreign nationals in the electoral rolls in the North-East. He went on: 'Another disturbing factor in this regard is the demand made by political parties for the inclusion in the electoral rolls of the names of such migrants who are not Indian citizens, without even questioning and properly determining their citizenship status.' Here was official confirmation of the agitators' worst fears.

In early 1979 a by-election was announced in the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency. Objections were raised against 47,658 voters and they were asked to furnish documentary proof to the court of law in support of their citizenship. Electoral registration officers heard about 36,000 cases and sustained more than 26,000 objections. Following this there was a demand for similar detection and deletion in the thirteen other parliamentary constituencies in the state.

The mood in Assam was growing militant by the day. In March 1979 at the Annual Conference of the All Assam Students Union (AASU) Prafulla Mahanta and Bhrigu Phukan, two quite mediocre student leaders, were elected as president and secretary and resolutions passed which made the current agitation inevitable.

Following standard Gandhian tactics AASU and AAGSP called for a series of peaceful bandhs and candidates filing nominations for the elections were gheraoed. On 12 December Begum Abida Ahmed was escorted by some senior police officers in a car from Gauhati to Barpeta, her constituency, where she intended to file her nomination papers. All along the route the agitators had set up road blocks which the police had to deal with. The next morning a student, Khargeshwar Talukdar, was found dead in a pond. The post mortem (performed by four Assamese doctors) revealed death by asphyxiation and drowning with only four superficial injuries (not a single scratch more than two cm long). Despite this evidence the Movement insisted that Talukdar died being beaten by police lathis and made him their first martyr.

The other martyr of those early days died on 3 January. Again there are two versions of what happened to Hazuri (documented in the Gandhi Peace Foundation report *Situation in Assam*, February '80) but here it is less clear-cut. Whether or not Hazuri was involved in such an incident it is clear that around that period (till 11 January) there was a massacre of Bengalis, mostly Muslims, in North Kamrup district. Forty dead bodies were found near Mokulmua, 15,000 were rendered homeless when 3000 homes were burnt down, mostly Bengali and Muslim at that. Names of the dead in each village were published in Hiren Gohain's weekly paper before it closed down (Gohain is a Marxist who heads the English faculty at Gauhati University.) On 11 January the authorities intervened and the CRPF were sent in. There was another round of brutalities, this time perpetrated on the Assamese, several of them innocent women, old people and children.

Between February 1980 and January 1983 twenty-one rounds of talks were held between the leaders of the agitation and the government in Delhi. After a point the opposition leaders were also invited to the talks. On 6 January, when the talks finally broke down, the two sides had come no nearer a solution but the very procedure of these talks has created a precedent: never before have a group of students engaged in such protracted parleys with the centre about the future of a state of the union.

The AAGSP/AASU demands were clear. Detect foreigners, delete their names from the electoral rolls, and finally deport them from the state. Also ensure that further migration stops into Assam. To this end they suggested a free zone be created along the border devoid of trees and housing. Anyone crossing it without valid travel documents from either side should be shot at.

At a pretty early stage in the talks the government agreed to delete and deport those who came into India after 25 March, 1971. From the other side the agitators agreed to forego their demand for deportation etc., of those who entered between 1951 and 1961 if the government agreed to 1961 as the base year. The talks got stuck at this point.

On 23 August, 1981 the government thought it had achieved a breakthrough. On that day, chief secretary of Assam, Ramesh Chandra, who is an observer at all the talks, claims the students, Phukan and Mahanta among them, verbally agreed to a draft that has come to bear its date as its name—the 23 August 1981 Draft. I quote some relevant extracts from this 'confidential' document:

> 3(b) Foreigners will continue to be detected on the basis of the Constitution and relevant laws including Citizenship Act, Foreigners Act and the Passport Act. While doing so the National Register of Citizens 1951, the electoral rolls including those of 1952, land records available with the government, birth and death registers and other relevant public documents could be made use of.
>
> That in detecting foreigners due procedure will be followed and it will be ensured that no harassment takes place. For the detection of the foreigners who came between 1961 and 1971 an impartial official machinery will be set up. Every person who is detected as a foreigner will have a right of appeal before a special tribunal.

And then there followed the controversial Section 3 (d) which broke the entire deal:

> Every person detected as a foreigner will be allowed to contest within three months his/her detection before a special Tribunal constituted for the purpose.(Here two alternatives were offered to the students.)'In doing so he/she may produce such evidence and any other public document to establish that he/she is *qualified* to

> be a citizen, OR, every foreigner so detected shall be given an opportunity to produce within three months evidence to establish before the tribunal set up for the purpose that he/she has a *claim for right to citizenship.*

It was a choice of euphemisms they were offered: *quality for citizenship* or *a claim for right to citizenship.* Why not *right to citizenship*? Ramesh Chandra was honest: 'It would have squeezed out too many of the people the government wanted to squeeze in.' So the trick behind the 23 August 1981 Draft was that while the government would appear to have conceded victory to the agitators it would in fact change the position by very little: most of those who had come in before 25 March 1971 would *qualify* for citizenship *even though they were not citizens,* and therefore strictly ought to be deported. Similarly, even though they did not *have a right to citizenship,* they would have a *claim to the right.* The 'boys' (as the agitation leaders are popularly known) of course deny any such verbal agreement between them and Rao Sahib Krishnaswamy, the cabinet secretary who handed them the draft, and even if they had come to one it would have been invalid: just as the government operates at these talks invoking a tacit premise, that anything agreed upon must be ratified by cabinet, so too the 'boys' were merely representatives who had to go back to AASU and AAGSP to ratify any agreement. (Perhaps it's just a coincidence but it seems that the talks foundered on clause 3 (d): 3D is the popular abbreviation of the agitators' demands: detention, deletion and deportation.)

The government is so insistent about the date 25 March 1971 because that is the date on which the new republic of Bangladesh was born, and in Bangladesh law it appears that if one was not physically present in Bangladesh on that date, one has no claims to citizenship. But what about those who fled from Tikka Khan's bullets even as late as 26 March?

The official Indira-Mujib Pact had nothing to do with immigration but despite Mrs Gandhi's assurances to the contrary (her declaration in the Rajya Sabha on 11 June 1980: 'There is no secret or other pact between Mujib and myself on this issue. . . ') it would appear there is another Indira-Mujib Pact or something to that effect which covers immigration. Otherwise, it is difficult to make sense of the letter DO No 11/180/72 TX dated 4 October, 1972 and written by T.C.A. Srinivasavadaran, joint secretary of the home ministry, to Shri D. Das, chief secretary, which starts as follows:

> My dear Das, In our letter. . . dated the 30th Sept 1972 comprehensive instructions have been sent in regard to the repatriation of the various categories of persons who had come to India from Bangladesh. It had been explained in that letter that according to the understanding between the governments of India and Bangladesh, the refugees who had come to India before March 25, 1971 whether Bengalis or non-Bengalis would not be sent back to Bangladesh.

Nibaran Bora suggests that in return for taking these refugees the pact allows India to send troops over to Bangladesh should the need arise to protect the North-East from armed aggression. Since he hasn't seen the pact, if it exists, that is, this is purely speculative. He doesn't even have any circumstantial evidence for this. Even so it is one plausible explanation as to why Mrs Gandhi should wish to honour a commitment.

Debo Prasad Barooah is known to be the 'brains' behind the boys. As professor of political science at Gauhati University he has taught Phukan, Mahanta and Rajkhowa and continues as AASU adviser. I asked him if he saw any compromise in the offing, any compromise the students would accept. He winked and said that to a question B.N. Sastri had put to Bhagwat Jha Azad, Azad had replied in Parliament that 12,000 families had migrated from Bangladesh to Assam till 1964. This trickle of immigration—till April '64—Barooah said the boys might consider 'accepting': beyond that there would be no compromise. But Mrs Gandhi too, whatever her reasons, seems intent on sticking to her stand so a satisfactory solution seems impossible.

In the three years of the talks an agreement had been reached on only one issue but now even that agreement has been repudiated. On 20 January, 1982, at the tripartite talks, the government had agreed to provide for the erection of a physical barrier and a zone 'free of human habitation' all along the Assam-Bangladesh border. In addition, the central government was to provide for 'intensive patrolling by security forces at the border to facilitate the patrolling and establishment of checkposts'. On 23 November, however, in Gauhati for informal talks, P.C. Sethi ruled out the construction of a wall or barbed wire fence at a press conference. It is possible that Sethi was speaking off the cuff but the government has not issued a clarification repudiating Sethi's remarks. The agitation leaders have taken this as a sign of bad faith and are therefore pessimistic about the future.

Congressmen in Delhi and Assam like to believe that a package deal consisting of something like the Verma formula (or the August 23 1981 Draft) along with job reservations for the Assamese and massive grants for improving Assam's economic situation will do the trick, but there are no signs that the agitators will be content with such a sop. In fact they have turned down such offers several times before.

The violence of the next four weeks will be a testament to the government's persistent bungling in Assam. But the dim outlines of a *partial* solution still present themselves: after the elections the government should follow up the detection of foreigners begun at Mangaldoi four years ago, delete all the names of foreigners from the electoral rolls, but not deport anyone. This will rob the agitation of its political clout without going back on past commitments. It will of course cost the major political parties their vote banks but that is a small price to pay for saving us from a potential Ulster.

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Guarding the Guardians

I have always felt that the caste system has been unfairly maligned. True it brought with it certain inequities, particularly when it became extremely rigid, but all told there was *something* to the notion that those who perform different social functions should be separated socially. For instance, it has always struck me as being a good idea that businessmen should be beyond the pale of decent society, in particular that administrators and judges should not mix with the commercial classes. So I am depressed to hear that more and more clubs in the country, unable to roll their lawns on the subscriptions they can raise from professionals and civil servants, have begun opening their doors to businessmen.

Now I have nothing against businessmen having a good time. My work is of an eclectic nature so I often find myself meeting them in the day, and occasionally, even in the evenings and I am pleased to report that, like the rest of us, they have hands and feet, and sometimes even hearts. But the problem is there are only three kinds of businessmen: those who are rich, those who are confident they will soon be rich, and those who will give their left arm to be rich. And in India, at least, it is not possible to become rich honestly.

It is when these businessmen, whether parvenu or otherwise, begin corrupting the administrators that I think the time comes to call a halt. But this last sentence begs large questions. Who corrupts? And where does corruption begin? It is a popular view that corruption begins in the heart but like most popular views it is only partly true. Unfortunately, too many liberals are addicted to this popular view and tend to elevate it to a full fledged political truth. If only true officials were good and honest, they argue, the problem of corruption would vanish. For if no one takes a bribe, no bribe can be given. But this way of looking at things ignores the sociology of corruption.

'Give me five thousand a year,' a character in a Thackeray novel once remarked, 'and I'll become an honest woman.' Five thousand pounds in Thackeray's time was a lot of money but the remark makes an important point: that honesty (like the ability to play the piano) is often an accomplishment that can be found in those who possess a certain degree of material satisfaction. Give a honest man enough to satisfy his (not always extravagant) wants and he will remain honest: treat him the way our 'socialist' government treats its civil servants and he very probably won't. I remember Iqbal Masud (who only recently retired from the revenue service) telling me how many honest officials he knew who began accepting bribes only in the last five years of their service, when the time had come for the daughters to be married and the sons educated.

Allied with this stupid notion that corruption on the whole begins in the heart of the official, is the ancient but equally stupid prejudice that the man who takes the bribe is guiltier than the man who gives it. Katayana did not blame the briber at all, instead suggesting that the intermediary should be fined (*Katayana Srauta Sutra*, 65:0-153).Both Manu and Vishnu too were harsher on the official who took the bribe maintaining that all his property be confiscated (*Manu-Smriti* 231 and *Vishnu Purana* V I76). Even today Antulay is the villain, not the Tatas who sought to obtain the advantage of their arrangement over the NCPA site.

But in fact it is the commercial classes who have always called the tune. There are ample inscriptions that underrate the political power they held in ancient India. (See S.C. Bhattacharya's *Some Aspects of Indian Society*, Calcutta 1978.) In the eighteenth century when the

Bengal trade attracted the North Indian commercial community to Mushirabad and Calcutta, they traded in more than just muslin and spices. Here is K.M. Panikkar on the subject from his classic *Asia and Western Dominance:* 'The Marwari millionaire of Bengal had become the equivalent of the comprador classes of Shanghai of a later period.' While the nawabs and generals were able to squeeze them occasionally, there was no doubt that effective power in the form of control of the economic life of the province had passed from the decrepit Mughal nobles to the *bania* capitalists who fawned on them in their *durbars* but held their purse strings tightly! It is worth remembering that it was these compradors, in particular Jagat Seth, who sold Bengal to the East India Company at Plassey thus creating British India.

By the nineteenth century the British administration in India realized the importance of keeping their merchants at bay. Political (though not necessarily economic) power passed out of the hands of the traders and into the hands of a mandarinate chosen by public examination. And one of the cardinal principles of the mandarinate was the separation between business and administration at all levels. As Russell, the celebrated nineteenth century correspondent of the London *Times* noted, that though 'a successful speculator or a merchant prince may force his way into good society in England. . .in India he must remain forever outside the sacred barrier, which keeps the non-official world from the high society of the services'. So much so that even so nationalist a historian as Panikkar concludes: 'There was thus no alliance between the Civil Service and big business, and the British Indian bureaucracy was not interested in the exploitation of India.'

Exactly twenty years ago this month, in March 1964, the Sanathanam Committee on Prevention of Corruption handed in its report and while its suggestions were not remarkable it is interesting to read what it had to say as to the origin of corruption in public life:

> Corruption can exist only if there is someone willing to corrupt and capable of corrupting. We regret to say that both this willingness and capacity to corrupt is found in the industrial and commercial classes. . . It is they who have control over large funds and are in a position to spend considerable sums of money in entertainment. It is they who maintain an army of liaison men and contact men, who live, spend, and entertain ostentatiously. We are unable to believe that so much money is being spent only for the purpose of getting things done quickly.

But as the liaison men know only too well, each man has his own price. I learnt this most chillingly when a young Marwari businessman I was sitting next to on a flight from Calcutta to Bombay, told me about an early lesson he had learnt. He was only twenty-two at the time and as the youngest son he managed the family unit in Jamshedpur where they manufactured some rather specialized components. A local Tata firm was their only customer and it was essential to keep a certain officer who made the buying decision well primed. 'Of course,' he said nonchalantly, 'people like that are usually not bought by money but in kind.' Then one day, a new officer came from Bombay who proved obdurate. The boy tried all the tricks he knew but finally in desperation telephoned his father in Delhi to say that at last a truly honest man had occupied the chair and that it was time for the family to wind up its unit in Jamshedpur. His father laughed and merely asked the boy to inform him when the officer was to leave for Delhi next.

The boy did that. 'And you won't believe it' he went on, 'my father simply befriended him! When a man cannot be bought by anything else, love and friendship will definitely work. The officer is still our very special friend. And I am still in Jamshedpur. In fact, I am going to Bombay to attend his daughter's wedding.' What was really frightening was I can swear there was *no* trace of irony in his use of the word 'friend'.

So the old question remains: who will guard the guardians? Many mistakenly think the original quip was a retort to Plato but it is instructive to note that the Latin tag *(quis custodiet ipsos custodes)* comes from Juvenal and its context is the quandary of a traveller who leaves his slaves to guard his nymphomaniac wife when going away. Faced with this problem, the solution most oriental potentates opted for was in essence the same as Plato's: they employed eunuchs. Plato's guardians too were men who could have no wants. But such men are difficult to find. Medieval Europe went in for the chastity belt instead. And that is what I want for India, something that will guard the guardians from the nymphomaniacs, social customs that will insulate our bureaucrats from the friendship of businessmen.

The Sunday Observer
4 March, 1984

A Night in Hell

Anees Chisti is a mild-mannered literary hack with greying sideburns who after taking more than one degree in chemistry served his time on Delhi's more respectable political magazines, *Mainstream* and *Seminar*. Readers of the *Sunday Observer* might remember his excellent page long analysis of Delhi's culture or his pieces on Muslim politics on the edit page. On the thirtieth of last month Chishti went to Bhopal with a view to staying there till the end of the elections in order to study some aspects of Muslim electoral behaviour in the city. To this end he checked into the Nalanda, a small shabby hotel in the old city. So when the disaster struck he was quite possibly the only journalist in the old city.

'I was trying to get one of the foreign stations on the radio at about 2.30 a.m. when I felt some choking in my throat and I thought it was some ordinary case of bad throat or something. I tried to get some cough syrup but then I realized that it was something much more than that. There was burning sensation in the eye. I somehow opened the door of my room. First I thought it was a hotel problem. I went out. I was running for some open space where I could get relief but I could get relief nowhere. Then I thought that it was gas someone had dropped for some political reasons because I had an earlier experience of gas during Krishna Menon's meeting in Sapru House in 1962 after the Chinese war after which he resigned. I felt this was something like gas. So I dressed up, took my identity card, filing authority, the money that I had because I didn't know if I would come back alive, or where I would be.

'When I came out I saw hordes of people moving towards some direction. I was new to Bhopal city, I didn't know all the routes. Nobody was in a position to tell me which road led to the Paintalees Bangle area where I had some friends, some access to communication. Anyway, I walked. Some landmarks were there. And that was a ghastly experience. I saw ladies almost undressed, straight out of the bed, in petticoats, children clinging onto their breasts, all wailing, weeping, some of them vomiting, some of them vomiting blood, some falling down, I now presume falling dead. In the Muslim religion we are told "*qayaamat ke waqt jo hoga*" *vaisa hee lag raha tha* ('how things will be on Judgement Day'—that's exactly how it felt).It was a sight. And when I was passing through Lover's Retreat or Pleasure Place of Kamala Park it was a very bad situation, people trying to enter temples. . . they were falling dead, family members were leaving their own family members behind and running for safety.

'My own rationality was challenged for the first time in my life—on that stretch of four kilometres. For a while I also thought some religious thoughts that might perhaps save me. But then I was back to my rational thinking very soon. My eyes were burning. In that condition I reached the ***Indian Express*** office, this was around 3.30, I thought I would find my friend N.K. Singh and find out what was happening. Nobody knew what was happening. But the office was locked from the inside. I sat there. Soon people started pouring in asking for blankets, sheets, water, all sorts of things. I gave them water, people started putting water into their eyes, but I never did because having been a chemistry student myself, I was not very sure of what the effect of water would be on the gas, because it was a gas after all. And nobody was telling where from the gas was coming. No announcement was made but everybody was saying that announcements have been made that you run away and all that, but I have since checked and to my knowledge no announcement had been made. Nobody I have spoken to had actually ***heard*** an announcement. The sky was clear, as I was passing I could see the stars. I didn't smell anything maybe because of panic *par log kehte hain ki sade hue baadam ki tarah badboo aa rahi thi* (but people said that there was a smell like that of rotten almonds).'

I have quoted Chishti's account at some length because of all the survivors I spoke to in Bhopal, in the *bastees* of the old city, in the Hamidia hospital, in the shops near the railway station, his account is the most lucid. In all the cases the pattern of discovery seems to have been the same. At first everyone imagined it was a problem with their own eyes, then on learning that other people's eyes were similarly affected, they thought something was the matter with their homes. When they got out and began to run they would soon discover that the route they had taken was useless. So they would run back and take another road. Many passed out, only to regain consciousness in another town.

But useful as such accounts are, in the end words fail us. And even if we were to summon a horrifically appropriate set of words that could tell what it was like that night it is unlikely we will be able to summon the emotions required to grasp the enormity of this vast tragedy which visited Bhopal. 'After a while,' Chishti said reflectively, 'we began to devalue the meaning of death. On seeing another dead body all one felt was a twinge of sadness, rather like what one feels when an Indian batsman walks back to the pavilion.'

Given the enormity of the disaster the collapse into triviality is inevitable. Unable to come to terms with the horror of the event the mind moves to the pettier arguments it is familiar with. Someone called Anderson is arrested, along with two others called Mahindra and Gokhale and a fresh excitement runs through the world of the newspapers. The attention of the reader is shifted to the drama of arrest and bail, press conferences and state aeroplanes. Does criminal law require *mens rea* to be established or not? Was *mens rea* established before the arrest? But those who have walked through hell for a night cannot become obsessed with the precise number of angels that can comfortably be balanced on the point of a pin.

The Sunday Observer
16 December, 1984

Tribals Relish Red Ants, says Patnaik

We are told repeatedly that J.B. Patnaik's government is 'callous'. Is the charge true? Or is it just the stock response of a cynical opposition and a jaded press to the pathetic actions of an incompetent government in one of the poorest states of the country?

Touring Kalahandi district this week I tried to keep an open mind. Much of what I saw was terrible, even, I thought, avoidable, but callousness? As an itinerant journalist I could not be sure. It was only when I got back to Bhubaneshwar that I learnt for certain.

As I stepped out of my jeep in Kendubardi, one of the 475 villages in Lanjigarh block, the worst-hit part of Kalahandi, I saw a young Adivasi using a twig to mix a meal in an aluminium pot. I asked him if I could see what he was preparing.

It was a mixture of large red ants, with larvae, salt and *haldi*. A good many of the ants were dead, already crushed by the twig. Others moved around the walls of the pot in frenzied activity. 'They all die when they are cooked,' the Adivasi assured me, evidently misunderstanding my shocked expression.

Through an interpreter we started a conversation. Their staple food was *mandiya* (*ragi*), he said, but this year they were reduced to eating *kai* (red ants) because there was no food. That was to be the only meal of the day for him and his family.

It must take eternity to catch enough ants to make a meal, I said. Presently Lakhan Majhi appeared with a straw basket tied to a long bamboo pole. He showed me how they used the apparatus. With the pole he shook the leaves of a peepul tree, and a quantity of ants tumbled into the basket, along with their white, fleshy larvae. Some of the ants got into my kurta and stung me.

Some years ago the government had given Lakhan 2.5 acres to cultivate. On these he grew *dhan* (rice) and *mandiya*. There was only one crop annually. This year the rains had failed him, he had harvested only 2.5 quintals paddy and half-a-quintal of *ragi*. His wife, Sanjho, had tuberculosis. There were four mouths to feed in his family and it was not enough. What other work did he do? '*Coolie ka kaam milta hai to karta hai*.' (Sometimes when I'm able to get a coolie's job I do that.) What about the government's food-for-work schemes? He had not heard of them.

Back in Bhubaneshwar I heard a lot about these schemes from Chief Minister J.B. Patnaik—about the special Nutrition Programmes and the Emergency Feeding Programmes. Was he satisfied that no one in his state had to resort to eating foul, unnatural things? 'No, no, there are Adivasis who eat some fruits of the jungle and all that.' Did they normally eat these fruits? 'No but what I am telling you is there is no reason for them to take the fruits or roots as there is enough food available. . .'

I told him about the ants in Kendubardi. Patnaik's voice dropped. '*Haaan*. That, of course, nothing unusual about it. The Chinese eat such snacks.'

But the people had told me that they were eating ants because they had nothing else to eat. 'No. Not that. *Kai* is a. . .er. . . merely you see, a type of food popular in many areas, particularly Koraput and. . .'

His voice suddenly changed, he became a Don briskly stating a bald fact. 'But that is not a staple food. They just take it.'

Is it a delicacy, I asked. 'A type of delicacy for them.' There was a long pause. 'But staple food is *mandiya*.'

Was he sure *kai* was a type of delicacy for them? '*Kai* is a type of thing, they like to and fry it and eat it. A type of delicacy.'

Such callousness has not been exhibited even in the Orissa Assembly where the debates on the conditions in Kalahandi have reached new lows of brutality. On one occasion an MLA produced samples of *ole kanda* and *mundi kanda*, large and small roots that the tribals have taken to eating in their destitution. A Congress(I) backbencher replied, 'But they are used to eating such things.'

Yes J.B. Patnaik is not alone. Waiting for my interview with the chief minister I met the collector of Kalahandi in an ante-room. I told him about the ants in Kendubardi. He looked surprised but sorrowful. Just then a DIG sitting at the table reading a newspaper interrupted our conversation with a cheerful laugh. 'Might it not be a connoisseur's food? It might be quite tasty.' I asked him what he meant by this. 'Oh, it's just a passing remark.'

Many such remarks are passed. They are at once serious and jesting. Indeed there may be readers in Bombay and Delhi who have begun to think: 'These Adivasis, maybe it is a delicacy for them. . .' To satisfy such doubters I have checked, not just with the tribals themselves but with an 'expert': Bidyhut Mohanty of the Delhi School of Economics has done work on Orissa famines. *Kai*, she confirms, is certainly not a delicacy, it could be called a distress food.

India Reports
29 March, 1987

IV. CONSERVATIVE MORALITY

The Sad, Sad Story of Indian Humour

Late last year Khushwant Singh was asked by the *Far Eastern Economic Review* to write a piece on Indian humour. Sardarji thought he could take the easy way out: he went to the bookshops for a collection of Indian jokes. He didn't find any. Put out, he promptly declared in his best-selling column that there was no such thing as Indian humour.

Khushwant Singh isn't alone in his opinion. Shankar Pillai, the first Indian cartoonist of any stature, who finally shut down his humour magazine, *Shankar's Weekly*, in 1975, after twenty-eight years, was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* last year as saying much the same thing: 'The curse of India is its lack of humour.' A good cartoonist, Shankar exaggerated the point (surely there are other candidates for that prime slot—Curse of India), but one can see what he means.

A look through the *Indian Express* files suggests that this is a familiar theme with edit writers. Noting G.K. Chesterton's rather obvious point that it was the ability to laugh that divided men from animals, the *Express* of 4 July 1970 went on to deplore our lack of humour, ending uncontroversially: 'Among the dullest gatherings in the world are conferences of Indian politicians.'

It's not just the *Express* though that bears out Khushwant Singh's case. We Indians are exceptionally touchy when it comes to jokes about ourselves. A major publisher, Jaico, once proposed an anthology of Sikh jokes. Such was the furore at their announcement that not only did they cancel the project, but they also apologized for having thought of it in the first place.

It's a popular idea that it's the Sikhs themselves who invent all the Sikh jokes, but like most popular ideas, it's not true. Khushwant Singh is adamant: 'You won't catch a Sikh telling a *baarah baje* (twelve o'clock) joke. We Indians are an ill-tempered people, quick to take offence. In addition, we have all sorts of taboos. We're also very keen on litigation,' he continued. 'It would be impossible to bring out a magazine like *Private Eye* or *Le Canard Enchaine*: our politicians have an inflated sense of their own importance and so anyone who runs a satirical magazine would be faced with a barrage of writs.'

If running a satirical magazine is out of the question, even writing amusing copy at other people's expense is difficult. Bobby Kooka was never in advertising and that probably explains why he wrote the funniest ads. His Air India campaign was widely appreciated, but when it came to *This Makes No Sense!*, a little pamphlet Kooka wrote for airline passengers in the early seventies, Parliament and the ministry combined their strength to scuttle it.

Kooka was certainly funnier than anyone else in the commercial world: 'Our sister airline, Indian Airlines, is in the cushy position of being a monopoly. Lucky chaps, they raise their fares just twice a day—before and after breakfast: there is just one snag—they don't serve breakfast.' Not only was he funny, he was frank: 'IATA will not let us haggle. Not on paper. But if you, dear passenger, paid the normal fare on any airline in the world, we shall be glad to pay to have your head examined.' Not surprisingly, Delhi soon banned the pamphlet.

'Jokes!' Singh exclaims. 'None of our jokes are original. Even the *baarah baje* joke is imported.' The Turks have a twelve o'clock joke about the Laz, a tribe by the Black Sea, reputed for their naïvete. Khushwant Singh feels the joke was brought to India by the Turkish invaders who applied it to the Sikhs. 'We have laughter and slapstick certainly, but humour, no. As for the jokes I publish in my columns, they're all imports. Whenever I read a collection of jokes I mark them with a special code: "S", "I", "Z", etc. "S" means I can possibly convert it to a Sikh joke: "I", an Indira Gandhi joke: "Z", a Zia joke. Quite honestly, I haven't heard a new Indian joke for the last ten years.'

So much for Khushwant Singh's confessions. It's time to throw a few books at the cynical Sikh. Does he think all Indian jokes are imports? Well, here's what Gershon Legman says in *The Rationale of the Dirty Joke* (1968): 'As to (jestbooks) copying from one another, that is only one intermediate step in their migrations: from one mouth to another, one book to another, one land to another. . . This answers the question. . . "Who invents jokes?" Jokes are not invented; they are evolved. And they arrive to us from other countries and older civilisations, by way of oral and printed infiltrations over a period of centuries and along certain massive and rather well delimited cultural highways.'

Singh hasn't heard a new Indian joke for the last ten years? Here's Hank Morgan, Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1988) who, having been carried from nineteenth century Harford to sixth century Camelot, had to endure the court-jester's after-dinner monologue: 'It seemed particularly sad to have to sit there, thirteen hundred years before I was born and listen again to poor, flat, worm-eaten jokes that had given me the dry gripes when I was a boy. . . it about convinced me that there isn't any such thing as a new joke possible.'

And as for the notion that humour is something apart from laughter and slapstick, here is the OED (Oxford English Dictionary), a pretty fat book to throw at anyone. 'Humour: That quality of action, speech or writing which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun . . . Distinguished from wit as being less purely intellectual.'

It's not just books one can throw at Singh, but commonsense and experience. All along journeys I've undertaken in India—in train or on foot—have been filled with laughter, so much so that the jesting sometimes begins to annoy. Our political cartoonists, Laxman, Abu and Shankar in particular, are excellent. Indians are among the world's most enthusiastic contributors to that international graveyard of jokes, the *Reader's Digest*. Last year Indians came third (after English-Canadian and British readers) in the league table of the number of jokes and fillers published in the international edition of the *Reader's Digest*: 320.

There has been, in recent years, a rapid increase in the number of humour magazines in the Indian languages. Some of our advertising campaigns, Amul and Air India particularly, are among the funniest anywhere. And we succeeded in producing a funny saint right in the beginning of this grim, nasty century. (If anyone doubts Pearl Buck's assertion that 'Gandhi was not only a saint, he was a humorist' let them consider Gandhi's deadpan response when asked what he thought of Western civilization: 'I think it would be a good idea.')

Perhaps one ought to take a historical view of the situation. Sardarji is right in that there are no jokebooks (except for some tired Birbal and Tenaliraman stories), but he is wrong in concluding that this means we have no humour. Indian humour is largely oral. Whereas our literature has in the main succeeded in shaking off the oral tradition in the last few centuries, our humour has yet to be collected, codified and annotated.

Not just collected, but converted to the written mode. In many ways, the position Indian humour is in today is like that of American humour in approximately the 1830s. A robust oral tradition of tall tales, jokes, gags, and rambling yarns was about to undergo a transformation so as to appear on the page. Americans, like Indians today, were incorrigible story swappers. 'All over the land,' wrote Andrew Lang, even as late as 1889, 'men are eternally "swapping stories" at bars, and in the long, endless journeys by railway and steamer. How little, comparatively, the English, "swap stories"!'

Nissim Ezekiel is the only poet to have exploited the possibilities of Indian English. (Desani has done so in verse, but he can hardly qualify as a poet.) Ezekiel's *Very Indian Poems* in Indian English were published in the *Illustrated Weekly* in the late sixties and were extremely popular. In them, he took off on Gujarati English :

> I am standing for peace and non-violence.
> Why world is fighting fighting
> Why all people of world
> Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
> I am simply not understanding.
> Ancient Indian wisdom is 100% correct.
> I should even say 200% correct.
> But modern generation is neglecting —
> Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.

Ezekiel's pidgin did not, however, liberate him; it stayed at the level of caricature. It used foreign standards of correctness to make fun, it did not capture the insights available to people who spoke that pidgin. Dialect in American folk journalism was used for precisely that purpose. Compare Ezekiel's patriot with Peter Finley Dunne's Mr Dooley, speaking here on the effects of progress in his brilliant Irish barman's voice: 'A cow goes lowin' softly in to Armour's an' comes out glue, beef, gelatin, fertylizer, celooloid, joolry, sofy cushions, hair restorer, washin' sody, soap, lithrachoor, an' bedsprings so quick that while aft she's still cow, for'ard she may be anything fr'm buttons to Pannyma hats.'

Of our present bunch of newspapermen, it is a satirist, V. Gangadhar, who occasionally uses the bilingualism of the Anglicized middle classes for humorous effect. (Devyani Chaubal pioneered this mode in film journalism and Shobha Dé followed suit.) Here is Gangadhar as Trishanku, writing 'Topsy Turvy,' a satirical column, in a Bombay newspaper: ' "*Radso nain, radso nain, Dellaben*" (Don't cry, don't cry, Miss Della), Perry Mason consoled her. "This case, this publicity is a bonanza to me. Don't you know my career is being threatened by chaps like Nick Carter, James Bond, George Smiley and so on. Thanks to friends of Desai, I've reestablished myself. *Thamne khabar che* (You know), the *ghatia lafda* king of Chicago wants me to represent him in a *maitri karar* case ." ' But even this relies for its humour solely upon the supposed incongruity of the two languages used (English and Gujarati).

Gangadhar apart, the other humorists of our English press stick to tepid English forms and in consequence are really unfunny. Abu is one of them and he gives an important reason why: 'It's hard to be humorous in a borrowed language. No matter how well you know it, the turn of phrase that creates good wit isn't there.' The other reason is more important: until our newspaper humorists, use the native oral tradition creatively and transform it as the Americans did in the last century, appropriating English for ourselves, our written humour won't be funny.

Indians in the nineteenth century wrote English with an embarrassing solemnity. The only one I know to have written humorously was a Bengali called Nobo Kishen Ghose who used the pseudonym Ram Sharma. Even he was solemn.

Even in the twentieth century, Indian English has been deathly dull. When Sir N.N. Sircar's and Satyamurti's thrusts and counter-thrusts in the Central Legislative Assembly used to be reported in the daily press, the account would be followed by a parenthesis which said '(laughter)'. It is gaffes like this which lead people like Khushwant Singh to conclude that Indian humour doesn't exist. I prefer the opposite conclusion, that it is our Indian middle class obsession with 'correct' English that has made us unfunny: we are in danger of being disconnected from the roots of our humour. For all that, there is hope still.

Two recent developments stand out like happy portents. Our humour may well grow along these lines. One is the creation of a private language by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* to express a whole world of Indian jokes, gags and wit in English. The other is the maturing of commercial Hindi cinema comedies in recent years, especially in the work of Sai Paranjape and Kundan Shah. Shah's first film *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* will be released next month and must be seen. All the dialects of Bombay Hindi feature in what is easily the funniest Hindi film for a decade. I shall quote a line from it to reveal its intricate bilingualism: the pun exists in English translation. An excited Naseeruddin Shah wraps his arms around Bhakti Bharve, who fantasizes escape: '*Mat nikaleeye*,' he yells delirious, '*main bhi aa raha hun*.' (Don't take it out, I am coming too.)

In 1832, Mrs Frances Trollope in her *Domestic Manners of the Americans* concluded that Americans didn't really have a sense of humour: people stayed away from the comedies in droves, she said, humorous magazines quickly flopped, so 'keenly cutting satire' was non-existent, and everybody was a sourpuss. Dickens, a decade later, reported that Americans 'certainly are not a humorous people, and their temperament always impressed me as being of a dull and gloomy character'. Clearly, every country has its Khushwants.

They were both wrong. Both Mrs Trollope and Dickens had failed to take note of the less obvious ways in which a huge unruly oral corpus was transforming itself onto the page. But I do not think Khushwant Singh's blunder is as vast as theirs. Exactly how vast it is, though, we shall learn in fifty years' time.

The Indian Express
7 August, 1983

Blind Justice

News of what must be the most extraordinary legal suggestion of the year came to me last Wednesday via the *Express*. My unmixed gratitude therefore goes to the alert legal correspondent of the nation's largest circulation daily who made available to us, on page one, the following gem which might otherwise have languished unpublicized in the law libraries of the land.

'A young Oxonian, Mr Salman Khurshid,' read the news item on the proceedings of the Supreme Court rape case hearing, 'suggested blinding instead of hanging as it affects only one of the senses. The prisoner is also incapacitated by this method. Another advantage he found in his noval (*sic*) suggestion was that if the prisoner was found innocent at a later period, eyes could be put back on him. Still another advantage was that the eyes could be used for medical or other beneficial purposes.'

Now the legal profession may admire such ruthlessly charitable logic (*or other beneficial purposes*) but the rest of us I am afraid are bound to feel that this is stretching the calculation of utilities a bit too far. I had always thought such calculation had been stretched to its extreme by Frau Ilse Koch, the wife of the commandant at Buchenwald in the 1940s, who was given to stretching the skins of prisoners executed at her husband's concentration camp (tattoos preferred) and from them fashioning exquisite lampshades, but clearly, one lives and learns.

But first things first. Who is this remarkable Mr Salman Khurshid? I am concerned. The fact is I happen to have a very dear friend who goes by that name. And at first glance it would appear he is the man. Salman was at Oxford for seven years, first as a student, then as a lecturer. He is also a lawyer who practices at the Supreme Court. In addition, he is busy these days cutting a controversial figure in the capital. He is frequently hauled into the gossip columns of that political rag, *Sunday*, indeed he was last there only a few weeks ago when it was alleged that the IB had produced a fat and uncomplimentary dossier on him because someone in the Prime Minister's secretariat (where Salman once worked) thought Salman could be a 'potent' threat to Rajiv Gandhi. Could Salman's love of controversy have led him to this?

I think not. I can think of five good reasons for saying that. One, Salman is a man of excellent sense. Two, he is man of liberal views, a disciple of Ronald Dworkin, that liberal whiz-kid of jurisprudence who will almost certainly become Edward Kennedy's attorney general one day. And the transatlantic professor is hardly likely to be amused by such a suggestion. Three, Salman comes from a distinguished family of Khayyamganj Pathans and good sense runs in their veins: his grandfather was the late Dr Zakir Husain, a sensible man if ever there was one, his father Khurshid Alam Khan is a respected union minister who, if rumour holds, might very soon become Vice-President. Four, Salman has prime ministerial ambitions and while such a preposterous suggestion might further the career of a political maverick it's not the sort of thing that improves the stock of a man who aspires to become the chief executive of an apparatus that governs one-fifth of mankind. Five, most conclusive, the *Express* report mentioned a young Oxonian: Salman is no longer young, he is thirty-one. So obviously there is another Salman Khurshid around in Delhi, an immature Oxford lawyer with a line in the bizarre.

Whoever this Khurshid is, he is not the first to come up with this strange request. David, praying in his affliction, asked God for no less effective justice ('Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake.' Psalms 69:23. See also Romans 11:10). In the year King Uzziah died Isaiah had a vision in which the Lord commanded him to do much the same ('. . . and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes.' Isaiah 6:9. See also Isa 44:18, John 12:40, 2 Corinthians 4:4) and when Elisha was peeved with the King of

Syria's army he went in for the same thing ('. . .Elisha prayed unto the LORD, and said, Smite these people, I pray thee, with blindness. And he smote them. . .' 2 Kings 6:18).

I don't have the stomach for Islamic justice so I'm afraid I don't have details of the various pashas and *shahenshahs* who put each other's eyes out by royal fiat but I'm sure one could apply to President Zia for the necessary precedents. More recently and nearer home, the policemen at Bhagalpur were caught chasing pretty much the same idea of justice except, as policemen are wont to, they had skipped out on due process. Clearly this Khurshid is in good company.

But the English were never keen on this sort of thing. Though they have occasionally gone in for boiling—a 1530 statute, superseded in 1547, deemed poisoning to be high treason and prescribed that the guilty be 'boyled to deathe withoute havynge any advantage of (their) clargie'—they have to my knowledge stayed away from mutilation. Their law jails, hangs and fines. It does not go about increasing the number of cripples in the land by design. Nor, for that matter, does ours.

Of course Khurshid offers a perfectly *logical* argument as to why we should change our law. If incapacitation of the convict is the aim why deprive the man of all five senses when the desired result can be obtained by depriving him of only one sense? The problem with such a naïve approach is that it forgets that human society is not a product of perfect logic, that logic is not the only value, that judicial measures—whether novel or medieval—cannot ignore custom and tradition. And it is just not our custom to mutilate.

There are a host of other problems with Khurshid's suggestion but I shall go into only one of them. The suggestion defies opthalmology. As things stand if you take a man's eyes out you cannot put them back again. At any rate, you cannot restore sight thus. There are only two methods of blinding which can be later reversed: making the cornea hazy and making the lens opaque. Both forms of blindness can be rectified by routine operations but neither would release the convict's eyes for 'medical or other beneficial purposes'.

Once we commence mutilation where will we draw the line? What next? Castration? I'm afraid Khurshid can't do an original number on that theme as the celebrated windbag of the bench, the former, Justice Krishna Iyer, anticipated any such attempt some years ago. *Rajendra Prasad vs State of UP* (AIR S.C. 1979 p916) was later severely qualified in *Bachan Singh vs State of Punjab* (AIR S.C. 1980 p898) but it is a judgement of the supreme court all the same. In the majority judgement in *Rajendra Prasad* Justice Iyer, while accepting that death was the legitimate penalty for antisocial activities, maintained that Prasad, who had killed only three people, his uncle and two cousins, was merely involved in a family feud and that anyway since he wasn't a 'habitual killer' he didn't deserve the noose. Iyer had more ingenious remedies up his sleeve: 'A course of anti aphrodisiac treatment or willing castration is a better recipe for this hypersexed human than outright death sentence.' (para 104)

Where will this revised logic of incapacitation finally take us? Flaying for indecent exposure? Lobotomy for indecent suggestion?

The Sunday Observer
14 August, 1983

Matrimonial Classifieds

Smirking at matrimonial advertisements in Indian newspapers has become a cliché of the British response to modern Indian. As soon as the diarrhoea-ridden traveller settles into the marble loo seat in his room at the *Taj*, it would appear he reaches for a copy of the *Times of India* and races to the page headed 'Matrimonials' to squeeze its columns for a few easy paragraphs that will lighten the journal he is keeping.

How quaint, they all seem to say. V.S. Naipaul in *Area of Darkness* (1964), Trevor Fishlock in *India File* (1963), Angela Wilkes in the *Sunday Times* earlier this year, Nicholas Coleridge in this week's London *Standard*: memory throws up these names at random, doubtless there are many others who've gone in for the same sort of fun. Marilyn Silverstone is American but the following extract from Dom Moraes's *Gone Away* (1960) typifies the response I am talking of:

> 'When I got back to the hotel I found Marilyn in her room chuckling over the matrimonial advertisements in one of the newspapers. This is the modern form of arranged marriages: instead of having an astrologer as go-between, as they did before, orthodox Indians now use the advertisement columns.
> "What's so funny?"

> Marilyn read out one of the advertisements between chuckles.
>
> "Wanted one vegetarian virgin, skilled in H.H. affairs, for 20-year-old clean-shaven bachelor. Caste no bar."
>
> "What on earth are H.H. affairs?"
>
> "House Hold," said Marilyn, and giggled furiously.'

There is a joke in all this, but it's not the joke the travellers get, nor is it a joke the advertisers intend. The joke is on the travellers who giggle in ignorance.

To understand what is funny about this we must first tease out the point of the travel writer's joke. He is aware that most of humanity for most of history (the British included) have preferred arranged marriages—that this ancient and possibly universal custom persists in India in the late twentieth century may be curious but is hardly funny. But arranging marriages by *advertisement* is something altogether different. . . . What a droll invention! That is what is implied in the giggles.

But what none of the travellers mentions, doubtless because they are ignorant not only of the customs of the country they are stumbling through but also of their own customs, is that the matrimonial advertisement came to India from Britain, where it was a common feature for more than a century and a half. The Indians had arranged marriages long before the British first set foot in India, but matrimonial columns in the newspapers are part of the imperial legacy, British innovations the Indians have found handy, like railway engines, parliament, and postage stamps.

Whoever else may be responsible, the British Museum can hardly be blamed for promoting this ignorance. Even if one can't be bothered to peruse eighteenth and nineteenth century newspapers there, the Museum has an excellent collection entitled *Matrimonial Advertisements 1746-1862* (cup. 407.ff.43) which has hundreds of samples.

It is difficult to think of a feature of the Indian advertisements which is not to be found in this collection. Are the Indian advertisers unduly worried about social status? Here is a not untypical item from the *Gazetteer* of 15 August 1775:

> 'A most advantageous opportunity now offers to any single young gentleman of character and genteel connexions; the advertiser of this will, upon the most disinterested terms, introduce such to a most accomplished young lady, with a fortune in her

> own hands of seventeen thousand pounds. To prevent trouble, no tradesman or shopkeeper will be accepted of. . . .'

Do the Indians specify particular religious sects?

> 'MATRIMONY—A Gentleman of RANK, a Protestant, and possessing an unencumbered income of 1,000 £, per annum is desirous of an union with an accomplished Young Lady of a suitable age, and whose station in society and connections are at least on a par with his own.' (1839)
> 'MATRIMONY—A GENTLEMAN, one of the two first professions, of respectable appearance and connections, a graduate, single, age between 25 and 35, agreeable, is most desirous of being HAPPY with a LADY of decidedly Evangelical sentiments (as he is so), amiable, accomplished, respectable. . . .' (1830)

Do the Indian advertisers ask for photographs? Consider this, from a Wiltshire journal in 1848:

> 'MATRIMONY, should this meet the eye of a pious lady under thirty. . . . she may obtain further information by stating particulars, with real name and address, by letter prepaid, enclosing *stamps* for return postage, and a *portrait* to. . . .'

Do the Indian advertisements speak of people like cattle? This is a typical eighteenth century advertisement:

> 'A Young Gentleman, a Native of North Britain, (but with very little of the Brogue) of a genteel Profession, tall in Stature, finely shaped and well proportioned, has a delicate Head of Hair, white Hand, a large Calf, strong Back, broad Shoulders. . . . ' (1760)

Are there some Indians who can't spell, can't use the English language properly? From the *Gloucestershire Chronicle*, sometime in 1838:

> 'MATRIMONY A Jentleamman who is residing near the senter of Gloucestershire quite retier from all bisness being possed of an income of $200 a year, wishes to in gage in wedlocks with any eaged woman of his eakles, if widow or aney other case for life interest only would be excepted as the Jentleman wishes not to enjoy any property from any family by any means whatever. Pleas to direct ABZ at the Gloucestershire Cronicuell printing

> office post paid with the perticulers of the case will be answered by later or in person in the inshewing week.'

Curious financial arrangements? From the *Gazetteer* of 11 July 1768:

> 'A Gentlewoman who has a friend lately married, and thereby entitled to 4000 £, has it in her power to assist a single gentleman, in a matter exactly of the same kind, if he can, through any means, raise or lend her about 150 £ or 200 £ for six months; the security is quite unexceptionable, and every thing is as clear as possible, and the success almost certain.'

Indeed some advertisers appear to have been confused and placed under *Matrimonials* proposals that should have gone under *Business Opportunities or Property.* Here is a member of the Commons advertising in 1778:

> 'A Gentleman, who is a Member of Parliament was elected by his own interest and the favour of his Constituents in the Borough which he represents; is upwards of thirty years of age; possessed of an estate in a very desirable part of England, of the annual value of sixteen hundred pounds, receives net thirteen or fourteen hundred, being greatly underlet; upon part of which estate he owes upon mortgage 13,000£. The estate is situated in a ring of fence, may consist of between three and four thousand acres of inclosed land in the South of England, and is in his own power to leave it to whom he pleases; he being a single man, having no relations at present, is very desirous of marrying a Lady of good temper, and some fortune, as neat as may be sufficient to pay off the incumbrance; the estate will be clear, and he proposes to settle as a jointure upon her, any sum not less than six hundred pounds a year, reserving something for their issue, as she in her discretion shall think fit; he has a country house well and completely furnished, a park stocked with deer, and other conveniences.
> Any Lady of Family may, by herself or agent, know the truth of this advertisement, by directing a line to L.M. to be left at the York Coffee house, St. James's-street. . . .'

Two years before that an even more extraordinary advertisement appeared, in the *Public Advertiser* of 16 April 1776. It was another lonely MP:

> 'A gentleman who hath fulfilled two succeeding seats in parliament, is near sixty years of age, lives in great splendour and hospitality, and from whom a considerable estate must pass if he dies without issue hath no objection to marry any widow or single lady, provided the party be of genteel birth, polite manners, and five, six, seven, or eight months gone in pregnancy. Letters addressed to—Brecknock Esq. at Will's Coffeehouse, facing the Admiralty, will be honoured with due attention, secrecy, and every possible mark of respect.'

But the Indians haven't caught up with the British in all respects. I have never come across an Indian matrimonial advertisement in verse but the English sometimes versified. To quote just one example, here is 'Horatio' of 81, St James's Street, a most particular gent who advertised in thirty lines for a woman who, *inter alia*,

> 'With manners quite gentle, bewitching, and bland
> Mozart and Rossini she must understand.
> Her eyes must be blue,—her complexion be fair
> Her form be well moulded, and dark brown her hair;
> Her eyelashes long, her teeth very white.
> And her lips invite kisses from morning to night.' (1830)

Advertising in newspapers was never the most respectable thing to do, nor is it in India today. It was, in Britain, and still is, in India, a convenience many resorted to when the traditional methods of finding a spouse did not prove satisfactory. It may have had something to do with increasing urbanization, with the breaking up of communities which were used to marrying off their young in traditional ways. More important, it had something to do with the fact that newspapers were around, and that someone got the bright idea of putting them to a new use.

Here is an argument for advertisements from a member of Gray's Inn who was himself advertising for a wife in 1847:

> 'MATRIMONY—Although it may be allowed that a prejudice exists against advertisements for matrimonial alliances, still it is also well known, and must be admitted, that many very happy and prosperous marriages have so occurred; it is also well known that the season of courtship is, in general, one of gross deceit and hypocrisy on the part of both, which by advertisement is wholly obviated, both parties knowing what they are about, and the truth must be made apparent.'

I think the lawyer makes too much of the honesty of advertisements. Perhaps the best arguments for them was, and still is, effectiveness. If the advertisements enable people to find a happiness they would not otherwise find they have served their purpose. Here is someone responding (by advertisement) to an invitation he read in the *Daily Advertiser* sometime in 1760:

> 'Whereas I had long despaired of meeting with a temptation to enter into the holy state of matrimony, till taking up the paper of Friday last, I read the agreeable advertisement of a Lady whose Sentiments jump so entirely with mine, I am convinced we are cut out for each other, and therefore take this method of describing myself: I am a Gentleman of unexceptionable good family: losses and crosses have reduced my fortune to my wardrobe, a diamond ring, a gold watch, and an amber-headed cane: but as you have generously said you don't even wish a fortune, I imagine this will be no hindrance: my person is far from disagreeable, my skin smooth and shining, my forehead high and polished, my eyes sharp tho' small, my nose long and aquiline, my mouth wide, and what teeth I have perfectly sound: all this, with the addition of a flaxen full bottom. . . .'

Unfortunately, the *Daily Advertiser* does not go on to record whether the publication of this description brought the penniless nob any happiness.

The Spectator
13 October, 1984
(*also in Imprint, January, 1986*)

Our Godless Brahmins

> *'I am here. . .speaking as a representative of no particular* Samaj, *but as a member of the great Hindu community which peoples this land and forms one-sixth of the human race. The true test of progress must be seen in signs which show that this vast mass of humanity is being vivified by the sacred fire which burns only to purify and elevate. There are those who think that no such signs*

> *can be seen, and that our highest duty is to separate ourselves from the decaying mass and look to our own safety. I have battled against this idea for the last 30 years and I shall protest against it, till life is spared and my voice permits me to speak.'*
>
> —Justice Ranade, DAV College, Lahore 1893

The most terrifying fact of intellectual life in our country today is that those who appear to control it are godless and irreligious. Marxists or liberals, academics or journalists, bookish or bright, those whose job it is to guide the thought of the country have ceased to think of God. And with that break come other breaks. Ranade's own life was spared for seven years till 1901, after him Gandhi carried on the astute reformer's task of vivifying the mass from within till 1948; since then it has been modish thinkers who separated themselves from the 'decaying mass' and looked to their own safety, who have come into their own.

Two months ago, soon after the massacre of Delhi, Romesh Thapar and Rajni Kothari organized an All India Intellectuals Conference at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. Most of it was the same old mumbo jumbo, 'Technocrats, Polity, Criminalization, Lumpenization, Technocrats, Polity, Systemic Features Polity, Polity'. But one shabbily dressed man stood out, even though he spoke for less than five minutes. 'Religion', Nirmal Verma said to the bunch of assembled pinkos, giving it to them straight, 'is the most precious thing in the life of every Indian. Why should we feel ashamed about it? Why should we in the name of this faithless secularism try to deny the deepest, the noblest quality of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, every religion? You know a strange thing has happened in the country in the last thirty years—something that we cherish most within us we feel ashamed to talk about. . . . I should not at any moment (be required to) compromise with my deepest religious feelings to become a better Indian. For me to be a better Indian implies to be a better Hindu or a better Sikh or a better Muslim.' He ended with the real poser. 'I think for once we should have a clear debate about the place of religion in a secular polity.'

Of course, no such debate ensued that day. The progressives in the audience who had begun to look distinctly uncomfortable when Verma spoke settled once again into the comfort of their worn positions as the baggy-trousered writer shuffled away from the microphones.

I propose to start that debate here. In a way there couldn't be a more opportune moment. A party with blood on its hands has received the largest ever mandate by playing on the communal fears of the Hindus.

Most of our countrymen are busy rejoicing. The secularists are bewildered. What went wrong? Why did the mantra fail?

In this paper and elsewhere I have written often enough of the folly of mass democracy; today I shall restrict myself to the asininity of irreligious secularism. (It is worth noting that this is not a solitary exercise, that the popular press too has begun to take shots at such targets: last week in the *Indian Express* J.D. Sethi spoke of how 'the Nehruvian consensus slowly got alienated from the mainstream of Indian culture, corrupted secularism and thus eroded nationalism'. He went on: 'Nehru's daughter left behind a vulgarised secularism which only the culturally enslaved Marxists and Western liberals appreciate.' Despite the clutter of polysyllabic clichés it is just possible to guess what he meant.)

It is widely accepted that there is much that is wrong with the beliefs and behaviour of our people, whether Hindu, Sikh or Muslim. The problem is: how do we work to correct these faults? The great nineteenth century reformers believed it was important to achieve results, not enough to blow one's modern trumpets. Accordingly they worked within Hinduism, redefining it in the process, emphasizing those elements they approved of, quoting religious texts to support their reformist moves. There was a good reason for this, one Vivekananda was at pains to stress: 'We know, that to the Indian mind there is nothing higher than religious ideals, that this is the keynote of Indian life, and we can only work in the line of least resistance. It is not only true that the ideal of religion is the highest ideal. In the case of India it is the only possible means of work; work in any other line, without first strengthening this, would be disastrous.'

Gandhi understood this idea perfectly. Our secular progressives, however, shun religion and instead of carrying the community with them, content themselves with railing at it. But when the head no longer speaks a language the limbs can understand, it is hardly surpris-ing that the entire body suffers. Politicians with an eye on the main ch-ance distort the message of the religions, validating and dignifying the immoral and irreligious. Bhindranwale, Rajiv and Vajpayee, in the past two years, each one of them has been guilty of this.

The secularist's response usually runs along these lines: 'At all costs religion must be kept out of politics. Gandhi brought religion into politics and we are reaping the whirlwind.' I am prepared to discuss the pros and cons of Gandhi's achievement some other time, for the moment it it sufficient to note that today religion *is* at the base of our politics. Besides, no one is asking politicians to involve themselves in religion, those who are responsible for the state of thought in the country are being asked to attend to religion, to bring it into the open in order to defeat the politician's subtle manipulation of religious sentiment. At its simplest level, the argument goes like this: no religion advocates the murder of innocents yet those who control religious opinion frequently do. One should counter their influence, not ignore it. A word of caution, though, may be in order. Religion *cannot* be brought into the open by the irreligious; in such matters a lack of conviction immediately shows, robbing the words of their substance.

So how does one start to give the call? And what will the publicity cost? Vivekananda in 1894 gave us an idea.

> 'Look at that handful of young men called into existence by the divine touch of Ramakrishna's feet. They have preached the message from Assam to Sind, from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. They have crossed the Himalayas at a height of twenty thousand feet over snow and ice on foot, and penetrated into the mysteries of Tibet. They have begged their bread, covered themselves with rags: they have been persecuted, followed by the police, kept in prison, and at last set free when the government was convinced of their innocence.
>
> 'They are now twenty. Make them two thousand tomorrow. . . . Call up the divinity within you, which will enable you to bear hunger and thirst, heat and cold. Sitting in luxurious homes, surrounded with all the comforts of life, and doling out a little religion may be good for other lands, but India has a truer instinct. It intuitively detects the mask. You must give up. . . . No great work can be done without sacrifice. . . .'
>
> (*Address to the Hindus of Madras*).

Of course it is much easier to mortgage one's mind to Marx or Mill and join the PUCL. And who among us has the courage to do any more?

The Sunday Observer
13 January, 1985

The Not So Silent Scream

The doctor behind the thick lenses and the business suit comes on slow and ponderous, pausing at the commas for effect, and you expect the worst. 'For the first time we are going to watch a child being torn apart, dismembered, disarticulated, crushed and destroyed by the unfeeling steel instruments of the abortionist.' All true, I suppose, but a bit emotional.

In many ways it is the film of the year, much more so than *Amadeus* or *Passage*: the *ET* of the womb, the non-fiction video nasty. *The Silent Scream* is a twenty-seven-minute documentary which uses Realtime Ultrasound to show us exactly how a twelve-week foetus reacts when it is being aborted.

Ronald Reagan has seen it twice and reportedly loves it. MPs in Britain saw it in November last year, the French Chamber of Deputies saw it three weeks ago. In Switzerland there were riots the week before last when Dr Nathanson, who made the film, showed it in Basle (he had to leave by the back entrance). At the University of Madrid medical school 4,000 students turned up to see the film in the same week. It has been shown on American television and clips have been shown on ITN but the entire film has yet to be seen on British television.

I recently ran into Dr Nathanson here in Rome, in the lobby of the Hotel Columbus just by St Peter's, minutes before he was to be granted a papal audience. We met again after the audience: the Jewish atheist looked clearly moved by the Pope's directness. When he had tried explaining who he was and what his background had been, the zappy Papa waved the details aside. 'I know all about you. Let us talk.'

There is quite a bit to know about Dr Bernard Nathanson and a lot of it is available in his book *Aborting America* (1979). Briefly: the son of a successful obstetrician, he was brought up in an intense Jewish household on West 86th Street. In the forties he attended Cornell, finally graduating in medicine from McGill in 1949, in which year he took the Hippocratic oath swearing *inter plurimos*, 'I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel, and in like manner I will not give a pessary to a woman to produce abortion.' As a young intern at Chicago he would spend his spare time in South Side dives guzzling fifteen-cent beers and singing with the other gynaecological interns:

There's a fortune. . .in abortion.
Just a twist of the wrist and you're through.
The population. . . of the nation
Won't grow if it's left up to you.
In the daytime. . .in the night-time
There is always some work to undo.
Oh there's a fortune. . .in abortion,
But you'll wind up in the pen before you're through.

Dr Nathanson went on to become an abortionist but he didn't end up in the pen. Instead, he achieved celebrity. In the late fifties, when he worked as gynaecologist, his mind turned to abortions because of his dissatisfaction with the way illegal abortions were being performed. But he didn't descend to quackery, he waited. In the summer of 1967, while Jimi Hendrix was busy dousing London with 'Purple Rain', Bernie Nathanson met a journalist called Larry Lader at a dinner party in New Jersey. Lader had just published a book titled, rather simply, *Abortion*, and he fervently wanted a repeal of the anti-abortion laws in America. They teamed up with Betty Friedan, Carol Greitzer and a few other like-minded souls to form the National Association for Repeal of Abortion Laws (Naral). The story of how Naral 'sold permissive abortion to the American public' is one of the most depressing accounts of success. The radicalized young women reporters—particularly on *Time* but all over the 'mega-press'—lapped up the stories the trendy agitators put out. In Nathanson's vivid phrase, 'the folks at Naral' were feeding 'raw meat to the drooling beasts in the media'. (Nathanson's second book, *The Abortion Papers* (1983), contains a good account of the disgraceful role of the media in the abortion wars.)

In 1970 New York State legalized abortion and Nathanson founded what was soon to become the largest abortion clinic in the Western world, the Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health, ominously acronymed Crash. Altogether he performed some 5,000 abortions and presided over another 65,000. What made Sammy run? 'Partly the thrill of being on the middle of a very serious social revolution, partly a quick and convenient fix for what had been an extremely difficult social and medical problem. . . .' He pauses and smiles. 'It was defiant, it was anti-authoritarian. . . .'

Along with Friedan and Lader, Nathanson invented all the catch-phrases of the movement: freedom of choice, a woman's right to control her own body, a matter between a woman and her doctor. 'We really sat down and just wrote 'em out and said, "Yeah, that sounds pretty good," ' reminisced Nathanson. 'Today I am chagrined to find they are thrown back at me as serious arguments. I myself coined them, cynically, knowing they were not really substantial, medically and morally.'

It wasn't just slogans they invented. They invented statistics too. 'How many deaths were we talking about when abortion was illegal? In Naral. . .it was always "5,000 to 10,000 a year". I confess that I knew the figures were totally false, and I suppose the others did too if they stopped to think of it' (*Aborting America*). In 1972, the last year before abortion on request became legal in America, the real figure was thirty-nine and statistical work done by Dr Thomas Hilgers at the Creighton University school of medicine shows that the average over a twenty-five-year period before 1973 was 250 deaths a year, the highest for one year being 388 in 1948. Even thirty-nine deaths a year would be a matter for alarm but Nathanson now rejects the familiar coat-hanger argument of the pro-abortionists, arguing that the figure would be next to negligible were abortion to be outlawed now, thanks to the development of the safe abortifacient: women who wanted to would buy prostaglandin suppositories on the black market and break the law in the privacy of their bathrooms without resort to dangerous surgery. (Most women, of course, would merely obey the law: in 1963 Hilgers calculates that there were approximately 100,000 illegal abortions in America: in 1983 1.5 million abortions were performed.)

On 22 January 1973 Blackmun J. delivered the supreme court's majority judgement in *Roe v. Wade*, setting aside a Texas anti-abortion law on the grounds that it infringed a woman's right to privacy, a right the location of which seemed to puzzle the court. (They weren't sure whether it lay in the 14th amendment or the 9th amendment.) Nathanson was pleased. In a year, however, he was to change his mind. In November 1974 he published his *volte face* in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, an article called 'Deeper into Abortion'. What made him turn against abortion? There was certainly no epiphany. I did not wake up one morning with all the answers. . .I think the realization just stole over me gradually, very gradually. . .It became clear to me, intellectually, that we could not continue to destroy foetuses. Seven months. Six months. Where does one stop? Slowly my mind went right back to the very moment of conception.'

And yet, 'in the gut I did not want abortion to end'. He had made a career out of abortion and, besides, it was convenient. Was there anything about the actual experience of aborting that made him change his mind? 'No,no,no, not at all. It was purely intellectual.' I must confess I felt a chill run through me when he said that.

On this point, though, Nathanson would argue that he has been consistent. In *Aborting America,* dismissing specious arguments against abortion, he had written: 'Anti-abortionists seem to delight especially in printing graphic descriptions of what abortion does to (the foetus). . .who wants to read graphic accounts of amputation, either? Any surgical procedure so described plays upon the squeamishness of the lay public. The physician is no butcher or ghoul when he takes the bloodiness of abortion matter-of-factly. . .we should debate fairly whether the decision to abort is moral and just, not whether, once the decision is made, abortion is bloody.' But isn't that just what the critics of *The Silent Scream* are saying?

The problem is that both sides have sensationalized the issue with such tactics. Soon after they had lost the Michigan referendum in the early seventies the executive committee of Naral produced a position paper called *An Outline for Action* from which I quote almost at random: 'In exploring picture sources I have not been able to find pictures of a dead woman with a catheter or a knitting needle still protruding. Pathologists say they would be removed before any photograph. . .the best possibility seems to be pictures of horribly ravaged uteri from needles, chemicals, etc.'

It's this old strategy Nathanson has had to fall back on in his film and the reason for it is obvious. Most people are stupid, like 'freedom of choice' in the sixties when Nathanson and his friends peddled it to them. For such people reasoned books are of no use and television alone can undo the harm, can dislodge the trendy nonsense that has taken hold of them. A convinced anti-abortionist, I find myself joining the Pope in applauding his vulgar yet useful efforts.

The Spectator
18 May, 1985

Staying Vegetarian

I was brought up to eat beefsteaks and even more unmentionable things. My parents, hardly vegetarian, refused to eat the more bizarre portions of our maid's Japanese cooking, but the *idoko* (Tokyo-born) that I was, I did not share their inhibitions. And from strange seafood to dead cow was nothing but a natural step, once we left Japan.

Giving it all up was not difficult. Which impressionable mind can read Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Nothing more strongly arouses our disgust than cannibalism, yet we make the same impression on Buddhists and vegetarians, for we feed on babies, though not on our own' without a strong sense of revulsion passing through it? But it was more than Stevenson, Shelley and Shaw that made me a vegetarian. At the age of eighteen I went through a fortunate phase, which has since lasted, during which my dislike of the taste of flesh was only rivalled by my dislike of the idea of eating it. Within a couple of months I had resolved never to eat fish or meat again, whether the phase of intense dislike lasted or no.

People refuse to believe that it was as easy as that. Their minds forever corrupted by popular notions of the heroic, they look for signs of a struggle ('inner torment') only to be told that it was a simple, quiet affirmation that did the trick. Going by my own experience I can say it is not difficult to become a vegetarian; it is, however, increasingly difficult to remain one.

Let me explain. It is not temptation I refer to. There is none of that. It is not inconvenience that I speak of either. I can put up with it. There is no place in the world where one cannot obtain *some* vegetarian food, enough at any rate to fill one's stomach and who needs any more than that? (Perhaps I am being unfair in making such short shrift of these two major reasons for default. There is a whole book to be written on the subject of vegetarians who failed to remain vegetarian for precisely these reasons: the most notable of the lot is perhaps Schweitzer, and the tribe includes Martin Bormann, the only one of Hitler's secretaries who shared the Fuhrer's dietary principles but who was often found scoffing meat in the kitchen, Charlotte Shaw, who soon discovered that it was easier to cook GBS's vegetarian dishes than eat them, and Jean Jacques Rousseau who was never a vegetarian but who fervently subscribed to the vegetarian ideal.)

What I am speaking of is fraud and deception. The division of labour being what it is in the modern world, most of us have to rely on others for our food, at least some of the time, and I do not know anyone who has as yet devised a simple and cheap enough test which can be readily performed outside of a laboratory several times a day to determine whether or not a given sample of food is vegetarian. So invariably one relies on those who provide us the food to tell the truth; such men are often businessmen; and businessmen, as is well known, rarely tell the truth.

Examples of such deception can be furnished in the hundredfold; space confines me, but the few I give should suffice. I had eaten Krona margarine in England for several years when I was informed that it contained mutton tallow. Likewise, most cheese I discovered is made by using rennet: but the laws about ingredients on the label are clearly not sufficient to ensure that those who market this cheese mention this fact. I have not checked out this story, but it is disturbing enough to have been told it, that sugar in some Indian mills is bleached using ground cows bones. I can only hope it is not true.

I felt this violation of trust most strongly at a small but delightful restaurant in Oxford which served excellent lunches, called Le Casse Croute. I liked the food and, surprisingly, even the waiters, and had taken to lunching there quite regularly. So fond was I of the place that I affectionately nicknamed it the Cat Cruise, to commemorate the relaxed chic of its clientele. The atmosphere was that of a club. Early on I had told the waiters I was a vegetarian and had settled on an order—onion tart, mushrooms with a cheese sauce, chocolate mousse and fresh orange juice—which the waiters assured me was absolutely vegetarian. Whenever I sat down to lunch the waiters would automatically bring me my fixed order. It was a case of culinary bliss.

Two terms later, I tasted ham in my onion tart. I speared the offending piece of pink on a fork and asked the waiter what that was. He blandly informed me it was a very small piece of very good ham. I never went to the Cat Cruise again.

And now, earlier this week we had a letter in the *Times of India*, which under any other circumstance I would have taken for the work of an above average professional humorist. I quote it in full, for bizarre though its suggestion may seem, it tells a sad story: 'Sir, most consumers are concerned about the recent disclosure that tallow from different animals is used in the manufacture of many varieties of soap. Since huge quantities of such imported tallow are already in the hands of soap manufacturers, this is likely to continue for at least some time. Therefore, let the soap industry be directed to mark prominently on the soap wrappers the type of tallow used, that is, beef, mutton or pork. This would help the user select that brand of soap to which he will have no objection on religious grounds. The vegetarian user would, of course, eschew all three brands and look for a vegetarian soap. P. L. Pasricha New Delhi.'

Last month in a little-known magazine called *Delhi Recorder* Karan Singh could be heard on this business of beef tallow. What he says on the subject is eminently sound and worth quoting, if only that a larger audience may hear what he has to say. 'One thing that surprises me', said the former health minister, 'is the apathy with which the public reacted to this episode. Nobody seems to be really worried about it. We are not sure how long we have been eating *pooris* and *pakoras* from *dhabas* adulterated with beef tallow.' He went on, 'And I am amazed that no national newspaper, except the *Tribune*, found it worthwhile to comment editorially on the subject. Is it because they do not consider the sentiments of Hindus worthy of serious consideration?' Unlike Karan Singh I do not wish to attribute a motive to this silence, and I cannot speak with his assurance that no national newspaper has written an editorial about this scandal, but I do not remember having read one, despite the fact that it is my business to look through the papers.

By now the government has conceded that this adulteration of vanaspati was not an isolated instance, that Jain Shudh Vanaspati was not the only offender. A front page report in the *Indian Express* of 2 October quotes a press note issued by the government: 'It is also stated that the Government agencies had checked through "thousands of samples" of vanaspati from the premises of various vanaspati units as well as from the markets. It is stated that in all but a very few cases, there was evidence of vanaspati having been adulterated with beef or mutton tallow.'

Later on the report says 'Action has been initiated against these unethical elements.' Sueing these manufacturers under section 2 of the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act is a beginning but it is not enough. What the government must do immediately is to make public (and not just in a press note) the names of the brands of vanaspati that have been found to contain animal tallow, even if it is only one tin of a particular brand that has been found adulterated. Those restaurants and homes which do not wish to have anything to do with the adulterated vanaspati can then buy the unadulterated brands, if there are any such.

As with the letter I have quoted, my column is not the work of a humorist. It is a difficult business these days, staying vegetarian; too difficult to laugh about it.

The Sunday Observer
4 April, 1990

Salad Days in Bangalore

Gandhi did not care much for doctors.

> 'Sometimes I think that quacks are better than doctors,' he wrote in his book *Hind Swaraj*, going on to observe: 'Hospitals are institutions for propagating vice.' His argument was simple: 'The business of a doctor is to take care of the body, or, properly speaking, not even that. Their businesses is really to rid the body of diseases that may afflict it. How do these diseases arise? Surely by our negligence or indulgence. I overeat, I have indigestion, I go to a doctor, he gives me medicine. I am cured, I overeat again, I take his pills again . . . . The doctor intervened and helped me to indulge myself. . . .Men take less care of their bodies and immorality increases.'

And that wasn't all.

> 'It is worth considering why we take up the profession of medicine. It is certainly not for the purpose of serving humanity. We become doctors so that we may obtain honours and riches. . . Doctors make a show of their knowledge, and charge exorbitant fees. Their preparations, which are intrinsically worth a few pence, cost shillings. The populace, in its credulity and in the hope of ridding itself of some disease, allows itself to be cheated. Are not quacks then, whom we know, better than the doctors who put on an air of humaneness?'

I must admit the 'whom we know' is a bit disturbing, but of the many unusual things this unusual man said in the course of his long life this has always struck me as being particularly sound. For the past two weeks my mind has been returning to these words as I push and stretch, fast and sweat at the Institute of Naturopathy and Yogic Sciences, India's smartest nature cure establishment, and perhaps even its best-known.

Gandhi would have approved of what they are doing to me. On my second day here they put me on a fast (two glasses of lime juice, two glasses of coconut water, unlimited quantities of filtered water) backed up by *neem* water enemas. On the fifth day I was on fruit juice, on the sixth on fruit, and it's been salads and sprouts ever since. But there is more to it than diet control. I wake at five and after a long walk in the farm and a game of badminton begin the yogic *kriyas* to cleanse my insides: three cups of lukewarm saline solution in one nostril and out of the other to sort out the nasal passage, six very large tumblers of a like solution drunk in between bouts of exercise in the gymnasium in order to effect a lavage of the entire alimentary tract and much else besides. (I drew the line one morning when the instructor inserted a thick wet waxed string deep into one of my nostrils and then urged me to use my middle and index fingers to pull it out of my mouth.) Then there are the treatments. Apart from the routine twice-daily mud packs on the eyes and abdomen I've had hip baths, chest packs, jet spray massages, underwater massages, mud baths, steam baths, arm and foot baths, saunas and even a plantain leaf pack where they tie you up in banana leaves and blankets and leave you in the hot sun to sweat it out. To keep you occupied the rest of the day there's yoga, meditation, table tennis and even a session of Jane Fonda's workouts on video just before supper. I skip that last diversion, and go for a walk on the farm instead, a bit like the 'Liar' Donne addressed in his epigram:

> Thou in the fields walkst out thy supping hours,
> And yet thou swear'st thou has supp'd like a king:
> Like Nebuchadnezzar perchance with grass and flowers.
> A salad worse than Spanish dieting.

Salads have not always been considered good for one's health. In our times they were revived in America. Just two years before Sylvester Graham began his campaign for fresh fruit and vegetables, the *New York Mirror* argued (28 August 1830) that 'fresh fruit should be religiously forbidden to all classes and especially children' and later, in 1832, with cholera afflicting the American cities and fruit and vegetables banned in Washington and New York, the *Mirror* reiterated common wisdom: 'Salads are to be particularly feared.' Graham began his work in New York that very year using the Bible Christians (who lived on fresh vegetables) as an example to further his case against the ruling superstition. He had a spectacular success and within three years the establishment had been won over: in its issue of 21 October 1835 the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* endorsed his case. In the *Hydropathic Encyclopaedia* (1851) Graham's assistant Dr Trall declared all fresh fruit and vegetables to be aniscorbutic and salads have been good news ever since.

External water treatment is the other part of naturopathy. Doubtless some such cures were known to every sort of ancient people from the Chinese to the Aztecs, but in our times it was a peasant in Austrian Silesia who discovered them. In 1816 Vincent Priessnitz crushed his finger and then, 'as it were by instinct, plunged this injured member into water till it ceased bleeding'. Three years later a laden wagon broke the ribs of his left side and he treated himself with water again. This led him to a lot of experimenting and then finally he opened a clinic in Graefenburg where, by all accounts, he did rather well for himself. In the *Handbook of Hydrotherapy* (1844) Joel Shew quotes a Captain Claridge as saying that in 1841 there were under Priessnitz's care, 'an archduchess, ten princes and princesses, at least one hundred countesses and barons, military men of all grades, several medical men, professors, advocates &c—in all about five hundred'.

Naturopathy came to India exactly hundred years ago when in 1885 a registrar in the revenue department in Andhra, one D. V. Sharma, came across Louis Kuhne's newly published *The New Science of Healing*. He first used the book to cure his wife and then proceeded to translate the book into Telugu. Soon after, the munsif magistrate of Benares, Krishna Swaroop, translated the book into Hindi, and to this day it has been in these two states, UP and Andhra Pradesh, that naturopathy has been best received.

Gandhi came to naturopathy late. While in London in the late 1880s he had greedily read Henry Salt's *Plea for Vegetarianism* and started a short-lived vegetarian club in Bayswater, with Edwin Arnold as vice-president and himself as secretary, but he had remained unaware of the naturopaths. It was in Johannesburg in 1901 that a German friend who ran a vegetarian restaurant lent him Just's *Return to Nature*, which prompted him to begin a series of experiments that would go on till the end of his life.

It was largely Gandhi's espousal of Nature Cure that made it so popular with Congressmen. It was of a piece with *khadi*, the homespun cloth Gandhi made a symbol of,village self-sufficiency and the independence movement. The Congress party (which was also established in 1885) met annually in the last week of every year; alongside it the All India Nature Cure Federation organized its annual do. 'My father, my uncle, they all came to Congress and naturopathy together, in 1919, when Gandhiji gave the call,' Dr Moorthy at the institute recalls. 'Nature Cure in those days moved hand in hand with Congress.'

Several Brahmins in Congress took to naturopathy, largely, one suspects, because their vegetarian diet prepared them for its discipline, but Nehru didn't think much of it. (He was a Kashmiri Brahmin, the only Brahmins who eat meat.) Consequently after independence there was hardly any emphasis on naturopathy, it was allowed to gasp away in little ashrams chiefly in UP and Andhra. Morarji Desai, whose naturopathy embraces autourine therapy, a discipline he learnt from Armstrong's *Water of Life* (1948), who in turn derived it from the biblical command 'Drink waters out of thine own cistern' (Proverbs V 15), though Prime Minister for two years, did nothing at all for naturopathy except a short book *Nature Cure* (1978), which he wrote while in prison during the Emergency. Hardly any money has been allocated to the naturopaths for research and, more important, government employees are not reimbursed for the cost of naturopathic treatment. Because there isn't much money in naturopathy the brighter medical students opt for allopathy. 'The real problem today,' Dr Moorthy mournfully says to me, 'is this: students who can't get into ordinary medical colleges come to the two naturopathic colleges; because of that it is very difficult to get good doctors. So even if we wanted to start another institute, even if there were funds, where would we get the doctors from?' He should know: his last job was as vice-principal of the Hyderabad college.

When in 1978 an industrialist who manufactures aluminium products decided he was going to build and support a naturopathic institute, he got in touch with Dr Moorthy who has ever since been the chief medical officer here. It's a well-run place, clean, 'spankingly modern', as an American journalist recently described it, but hardly an ashram, which is what the brochure makes it out to be. A fifth of the patients at any time are there free, a noble provision, but the rest get the accommodation they pay for: there are nests, huts, cottages and single and double rooms. Industrialists, I observed, made for the 'luxuriously furnished twin bedroom' nests, mere businessmen for the huts, professionals for the cottages and the rest of the middle class contented itself with the single and double rooms. This is possibly a wise move: by offering different levels of comfort one attracts the widest possible spectrum of patients; nevertheless, the strong presence of the uncultured rich—with their jiggling folds of fat—has made me distinctly uncomfortable. (Rajiv's 'bold, innovative' budget which scrapped death duties and brought income tax levels down is ritually praised whenever three people get together.)

Otherwise, I feel excellent. I've lost four kilograms and I haven't felt fitter in years, but Gandhi's concern for the health of the villagers disturbs me as I guzzle my mango juice and hear three rich children tell each other all they've heard their parents say about champagne.

Early in 1946 Gandhi had tried to run a Nature Cure clinic in Poona to realize his dreams. He soon came a cropper and in his weekly journal *Harijan* he recorded with characteristic honesty on 17 March:

> 'I feel I know the method of Nature Cure for the villagers of India. Therefore I should at once have known that Nature Cure for the villagers could not be attempted in Poona City. But a Trust was made. Very sober Jehangirji Patel permitted himself to be a co-trustee with Dr Mehta and me and I hastened to Poona to run for the poor Dr Mehta's erstwhile clinic which was designed for the rich. I suggested some drastic changes but last Monday the knowledge dawned upon me that I was a fool to think I could ever hope to make an institute for the poor in a town. . . . How is a villager coming to Poona to understand and carry out my instructions to apply mud poultices, take sun cure, hip and friction sitz baths or certain foods cooked conservatively? He would expect me to give him a powder or a potion to swallow and be done with it. Nature Cure connotes a way of life which has to be learnt; it is not a drug cure as we understand it. The treatment to be efficacious can, therefore, only take place in or near a man's cottage or house. . . .'

A hundred years after it first came to India, Nature Cure is thriving here, largely as a hobby of the rich. The villagers of India, for whom Gandhi intended the therapy, still have to make do with avaricious allopathic doctors, who continue to hand out pills and propagate vice.

The Spectator
1 June, 1985

Auschwitz for the Chickens

> *'The day may come when the rest of animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognised that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the* os sacrum *are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or, perhaps, the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is, beyond comparison, a more rational as well as a more conversable animal than an infant of a day, a week, or even a month old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they* reason? *nor, Can they* talk? *but, Can they* suffer?'

That was Bentham in his Introduction to *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), one of the first and certainly the most eloquent defence of the rights of animals in the Western world. But it wasn't Bentham's logic, rather a verse of Peter Porter's, that first set me thinking of the fate of animals when I was a callow fifteen-year-old who ate meat and visited discotheques:

London is full of chickens on electric spits,
    Cooking in windows where the people pass.
This, say the chickens, is their Auschwitz
    And all poultry eaters are psychopaths.

A few years after reading that I turned vegetarian for a number of reasons: religious, ethical, aesthetic, hygienic. Porter's lines ceased to rebuke me and I forgot them. Three weekends ago the strange lines came back to me, kept running through my brain as I accompanied the masked members of the B group of Merseyside Animal Liberation Front to observe them steal thirty chickens in the middle of the night from an unguarded broiler farm near Chester. I concede that the truth of our times is simultaneously grim and comic, but the comedy doesn't lighten the grimness, only makes it grotesque. When the co-ordinator had finally prised open a filter of one of the sheds with a hammer and screwdriver he invited me to climb the wall and look in: I saw thousands and thousands of chickens, fat, crammed hens really, squawking away, tightly packed together, falling over each other in an attempt to get to the drinking water, stinking. 'Here, wear my gloves so you don't leave any fingerprints behind.' *This, say the chickens, is their Auschwitz. . . .*

The first time I went up to Liverpool to observe a raid my contact—an unemployed young Welsh girl with a degree in sociology from Bradford—met me at the station and apologized. 'I tried your number in London, I'm sorry, the raid's been called off. The police took in some of our people yesterday. Next weekend should be okay.'

The following Saturday I went back to Liverpool. She was there at the station again. She would come to the Adephi to collect me at five. We took a bus to Sefton Park. What was the programme? 'Don't worry, you'll be told later this evening, I imagine.' We must have waited for at least forty-five minutes by the statue of Eros in front of the shut park café when a young bearded man in jeans came along. He handed the girl a note and took me away.

We got on another bus. 'Sorry about all this James Bond stuff but the Merseyside unit is very good on security. The co-ordinator is very suspicious. I don't think he trusts me either. He'll probably meet you this evening.' My escort was unemployed but had worked in the past as a film projectionist. 'Can't really work now, I'm a single parent.' Did he go on raids? 'Can't, have the kid to think of. A lot of people think the ALF does glamorous work. I can tell you there's nothing glamorous about standing all night in a wet field.'

We got down at the end of the Speke Industrial Estate. We were at the edge of Liverpool, there were no more buildings beyond this, the sky was broad and low. Past a pub—called, appropriately enough, the Dove and Olive Branch—we took a footpath through a field of tall,dry grass.

It was a small stone cottage, untidy and rather basic. The loo was in the outhouse, a much used commode stuffed with wads of wet pink toilet paper. There were several posters of Marc Bolan on the walls, a cancer appeal for the Bradford Lord Mayor's Appeal Fund and stickers with inscriptions like FUR COATS ARE SECOND HAND RIP-OFFS. I went up to the bedroom to meet the co-ordinator.

He was in his late twenties, wore tight,faded jeans, a combat jacket with a hood, white wool gloves and army boots. A dark scarf masked his face. Born and brought up in Liverpool, he had left his comprehensive at sixteen, done four O levels at a college of further education by the time he was eighteen and then spent three-and-a-half years in the army. The army? 'If you leave a College of FE at eighteen you've missed the boat for apprenticeships. You can learn a skill in the army. And after the army you tend to get preferential treatment from employers.' He had: he was an electrician and worked in 'private industry'.

He was a Catholic. Irish or English? 'I'm not going to answer that question,' he said gruffly, the only sour note in our acquaintance. He had been brought up on a council estate, along with two sisters and three brothers. His father had a white-collar job in local government, his mother had once done an office job for the council but had since been made redundant. She had always voted Labour, his father had Liberal sympathies. They both spoke warmly of Ted Heath. 'If my father sees whales being killed on television he is appalled, goes and makes a donation. My mother too supports things like Greenpeace, both of them send money.' He hadn't told them of his ALF activities, not because they would disapprove but because secrecy was vital and 'they're only human after all'.

What were his own politics? He was a bit evasive. An anarchist? 'Definitely not an anarchist or a communist. I don't regard them as people who have anything to say.' Did he think the vote was of any use? He laughed. 'In Britain at this point in time we can change things through Parliament. The whale products did get banned in 1980. But when you're faced with multinationals there is little that government can do. Things are getting worse, the little companies are getting bought by the large multinationals and as time goes on your chances of changing things through legislation are getting smaller.' Surely direct action could only make a very small difference? 'I regard the ALF as a catalyst not only for animal rights but for all kinds of liberation movements.'

Till two years ago he used to stand on street corners, getting people to sign petitions, distributing leaflets. One Sunday morning, doing his rounds with the leaflets, he walked into a battery farm. 'The door was open and for the first time I saw the inside of a battery unit. There were hundreds of heads poking out, five chickens to a tiny cage and rows and rows of cages. Their feathers were missing, beaks were missing.'

Within a few months he had formed the Merseyside ALF. There were, in all, five groups: A, B, C, D, and E, each with eight members. C group is the intelligence unit, the middle-class ones with a plausible manner who do the reconnaissance posing as birdwatchers, always in couples, often with a dog. The rest liberate animals. Members of one group do not know members of other groups. On Sundays they train in woodlands around dawn doing military-style physical exercises, crossing obstacles and learning to cut wires. *Peace News* recently accused them of setting up a paramilitary organization.

The next night I went back to the house to wait for the raiders. Messages kept coming in on the CB radio. 'We've just heard that you're okay, no one's followed you.' (There is a set of euphemistic words that prevents others listening in from getting suspicious: members are 'friends', the birds 'goods' and I was 'the guest'. In Yorkshire, though, the concern for security is such that they keep scaling down CB channels every five minutes.)

I waited for hours. The co-ordinator finally showed up and explained they were going to nick thirty chickens. Homes had been found for each one of them, as is standard practice. The birds would be taken initially to a homing unit near Liverpool where sympathetic vets would examine them, then be taken to their new homes.

We left some time after two. The co-ordinator apologized for the delay. Someone had banged one van earlier that day, another vehicle had a broken fan belt, a third wouldn't start. So we had to make do with what there was, a not very reliable van they had resorted to in desperation.

It creaked. The co-ordinator sat in front, a girl drove. I sat behind with a dog and a new recruit and was asked to keep my eyes down throughout. In case the police stopped us—this was a bad time to be out on the road—the story was that we had been to Anglesea for the day, birdwatching. A bag full of binoculars and bird books completed the cover. We crossed Runcorn bridge, went in the direction of Hoylake, then turned towards Chester. After that I lost track of where we were.

We parked near a grove off the main road. The equipment had been left there the day before in a black plastic bag. The girl stayed in the van; the co-ordinator, the new recruit and I set off. 'Pay attention to each step and you will make less noise.' We tramped across an open field. Another field. 'Don't worry, the rest of the B group is in that wood, looking out.' They had portable CB radios, the co-ordinator wore a beeper on his shirt.

The stink alerted me that we were near the birds. The co-ordinator pointed out the boiler sheds. There were four of them; each contained 15,000 chickens he said. There was a chink of light on one. 'That's a loose filter: we spotted it on earlier trips. That's where I shall enter from.' I was asked to wait and watch while the two of them slid under the hedge onto the farm.

After I had seen the chickens I climbed down from the shed and waited. 'Let's go now,' the recruit said to me. But I wanted to see the chickens being rescued. 'He says they're too old.' Too old? 'Yes, we hadn't expected fifteen-week-old chickens. They'll make a racket when he goes down and we can't risk you being here. Some friends of ours will come and take the goods.'

It was raining when we tramped back and my spectacles got so wet I couldn't see. The recruit didn't know the way to the van so we got lost. He panicked and began to run. I followed him, my wellingtons splashing in the mud. When we finally found the van it wouldn't start. We pushed but the wheels sank into the ground. The dog began to bark.

Exactly 110 years ago the morality of vivisection was under debate in England and the *Spectator*, to its credit, took the lead in influencing public opinion. On 2 January 1875, the *Lancet* published an appeal to the members of the SPCA that they initiate a Bill intended to restrict vivisection.

The *Times* was sceptical, just as it had been in 1800 when a Bill to prohibit bull-baiting was first introduced, but the *Spectator* (30 January) noted the *Lancet*'s demand for legislation and expressed its 'very sincere pleasure' that the medical paper had taken this line.

Next week (6 February) the *Spectator* published a letter that had appeared the previous week in the *Morning Post*. Written by a former vivisector, it described in brutal detail the workings of a laboratory where experiments were performed on dogs. 'Let no one read the letter who has already made up his mind that the practice must be rigidly restricted or put an end to,' warned the editor. 'For such a one it would be needless suffering.'

The campaign had its effect. On 12 February a long letter appeared in the columns of the *Pall Mall Gazette* written by someone who had been prompted by the description of horrors he had read in the previous week's *Spectator:*

> . . . This, then, is the glorious future to which the advocate of secular education may look forward: the dawn that gilds the horizon of his hopes! An age when all forms of religious thought shall be things of the past; when Chemistry and Biology shall be the ABC of a State education enforced on all; when vivisection shall be practised in every college and school; and when the man

> of science, looking forth over a world which will then own no other sway than his, shall exult in the thought that he made of this fair green earth, if not a heaven for man, at least a hell for animals.

The author of this prescient letter was none other than Mr Lewis Carroll.

The good men of the SPCA, it appears, took their time in responding. (They would: in 1868 John Stuart Mill declined the vice-presidency of the Society on the ground that its operations were limited 'to the offences committed by the uninfluential classes of society'.)

So on 20 March the *Spectator* once again urged the Society 'to gird itself to the work' of 'putting a strong curb on this ruling scientific passion'. 'Pain', the piece noted, 'is a fearful natural evil, but the willingness to inflict agony on one creature for another creature's relief, or possible relief, is a moral evil.'

A Bill was introduced in Parliament. Through 1876 the *Spectator* followed the progress of the Bill, on occasion giving Stanley Jevons a wigging when the logician introduced an illogical argument in support of vivisection (29 April), but mostly noting how the Bill was being emasculated. On 12 August it spoke of the 'severely vivisected, and, we might almost say, disembowelled, Vivisection Bill':

> We cannot say we much value the Bill, as it is now likely to be passed. But no one who knows the evidence well can doubt that the moral distrust of the humanity of physiologists which it still expresses, is a moral distrust justified by the most convincing of all testimony—spontaneous confession.

The Cruelty to Animals Act 1876 is to this day the sole protector of laboratory animals in Britain: there were at least a dozen Private Members' Bills between 1966 and 1976, all of which failed to make it to the statute book. In 1876 less than 800 vivisection experiments were performed in Britain but even so the *Spectator* felt the Act was not good enough: last month the Home Office revealed that 3.5 million such experiments were carried out in 1984, the lowest figure since 1959.

Further, some new scientific procedures beat the Act because they defied the Victorian imagination. For example, the use of animals to grow tumours for research into cancer is unregulated as the Act describes a procedure as an experiment only if a question is being asked: in the case of a tumour growth the conclusion is known.

The *Spectator* was right on the other point as well, the moral distrust of the humanity of physiologists. The night before I was taken on the raid, I was shown *The Primates Film*, a video made by researchers in the Head Injury Clinic of the University of Pennsylvania and stolen by the American ALF in June 1984. Electrodes are driven into a baboon's brain, another baboon has a metal helmet cemented to its head. A researcher then bashes this helmet with a hammer.

Towards the end of the film a woman researcher picks up a brain-damaged baboon by its shoulders and the rest have some fun with it. She flops the baboon about, making it pose for the video while off camera the men in white coats laugh and joke. 'Is the punk okay?' asks one. The others guffaw. 'Punk? Ha ha ha.' The baboon writhes. 'Right over here, say *cheese*.' What fun. 'I hope the vivisection people don't get hold of this film.'

The moral urgency of the question of vivisection, and of the larger question of the status of animals in our society, is even greater today than it was 110 years ago when the *Spectator* exercised itself about such matters. Going by the rate at which wine and food columns sprout in this paper, I suspect readers today have other interests. If so, that is a tragedy and it says something about contemporary Britain.

There is something sad and ridiculous about semi-educated men in masks going about their task of liberating thirty chickens at a time in the dead of night when thousands remain in the cramped broiler farms. But there is a moral quality to these men which cannot be smirked away. I am no admirer of 'direct action'. I would rather they worked for legislative change. But what is truly sad—and ridiculous—is that the well-heeled and the well-educated, the ones who could influence legislation more effectively, have backed away from such moral concerns, and are more interested in the contents of next month's *Tatler*—or even next week's *Spectator*.

The Spectator,
31 August, 1985

Liberation Liturgy

The Pope may not be keen on the liberation that Fr. Boff has in mind but the liberation of the oriental Catholic churches from the Latin grip seems an altogether different matter.

'For the body is not one member, but many,' said Paul to the Corinthians, adding with admirable logic, 'and if they were all one member, where were the body?' Sadly, Rome seems to have ignored this wisdom in the late fifteenth century when a succession of Popes—Calixtus III in 1481, Alexander VI in 1497 and, later, Leo X in 1514—granted the Portuguese the privilege of *padroado*, or patronage, which in practice meant exclusive ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the newly discovered territories in the east. In granting this patronage Rome clearly forgot the presence of the Christian community of Malabar which used to receive its bishops from the Patriarch of Seleucia.

The Malabar Christians of Kerala claim descent from the converts Thomas Didymus made in India and it seems plausible that theirs is an apostolic church: St Ephrem, St Ambrose and St Jerome hold that Thomas came into India while Origen, Eusebius and Rufinus of Aquilea maintain he evangelized Parthia. Perhaps he did both. Though the Acts are silent about his Malabar mission, among the bishops who attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 was one John who signed himself as the Metropolitan of the Churches of Great India.

Rome regretted its error soon enough. Vasco da Gama landed in India in 1498 and by 1533 the Latin see of Goa had been erected. Soon, Pope after Pope explicitly asserted the independence of the Syrian Malabar church. But the Portuguese would have none of that and insisted on the letter of the Concordat. For a while, however, things went well. St Francis Xavier appears to have got on with the Syrians and recommended their saintly bishop to King John, saying that 'the king needs more to be favoured by the bishop in his prayers than the bishop needs the temporal favour of your highness'.

It was after that bishop died that the relationship began to sour. In 1555 the Patriarch sent out another bishop to the Malabaris, Joseph Sulaka, but the Portuguese abducted him from his ship and kept him in confinement in Bassein near Bombay. There he was subjected to a strict cross-examination in Christian doctrine and, though he satisfied his inquisitors on this score, he refused to assent to the suppression of the Syrian rite by the Latin.

He was allowed to proceed to Malabar. But the Portuguese would not leave him alone and periodically he was denounced to Lisbon and Rome as a heretic. Mar Joseph undertook two trips to Lisbon and one to Rome before he finally persuaded the authorities that he had been framed by the Jesuits, who did not seem to understand Syrian Malabar rites and customs.

None of this endeared the Portuguese to Syrian Malabaris. In 1597, following the death of the next bishop—whom the Portugese similarly abducted on the high seas—the jurisdictional question came up once again and the archbishop of Goa, Alexio de Menezes, decided to visit Malabar to settle the matter once and for all. His solution was to persuade the Syrian priests and the leaders of the laity to attend the synod of Diamper in 1599.

What happened at the synod remains to this day a matter of acute controversy. Menezes spoke no Malayalam, the Syrians spoke no Portuguese. Goans like to believe that the synod brought the Malabaris in line doctrinally. Malabaris insist that the synod Latinized their liturgy. Perhaps both are right. Menezes wanted to remove all traces of Nestorianism, and to this end it appears he altered both Syrian doctrines and rites. The Chaldean Patriarch was declared a schismatic and a heretic; there were not two different laws, one of Thomas and one of Peter, but only one of Christ, and his vicar was firmly in Rome. And since Rome was far away, the Goan inquisition extended its authority to the Malabar Christians. Their books were burnt, their feasts were removed from the breviary, their church was colonized.

The Malabaris did revolt once—in 1653—when they swore by the crooked cross at Mattancherry that they would never again accept the yoke of the Jesuits. But that was soon enough remedied, for Rome sent out a Carmelite mission in 1657 to salvage the situation. The mission won back eighty-four of 116 churches before the Dutch captured Cochin from the Portuguese and drove out the Carmelites. For over 300 years the Syro-Malabar Catholics remained in the Latin grip and only in this century have they been able to strike out on their own.

Convoluted though it is, it is important to grasp this background if one is to understand the significance of the Pope's visit to Kottayam. For here last Saturday before a crowd of 350,000 (according to Reuters: every journalist has his own estimate) for the first time ever the Vicar of Christ conducted high mass in the (restored) Syro-Malabar rites. And during that mass the Holy Father beatified the first two Indians ever. It was a matter of pride in this crowded Kerala town that they were both

Syro-Malabars. (Pride in Kottayam but resentment in Goa. The Goans have been rooting for Joseph Vaz and Agnel d'Souza, but the devil's advocate has taken his time with them.) 'We are thrilled,' said the priest standing next to me when the BBC man thrust a mike in his face in the middle of the mass.

In 1962, the SMs rejected the Latin liturgy. And for the past twenty-four years they have been experimenting to get it right. On Saturday the restored rite (newly approved by Rome) was used for the first time. Unlike the Latin mass the SM mass begins with a reminder of our divine vocation and proceeds to sinfulness only later. On the whole it is devotional rather than dogmatic, the mysteries are stressed rather than participation. There is a difference in vestments (the SM cape can be any colour) and in the architecture of the *rostium* (a tiled pagoda-like roof inspired by local Hindu temples).

As things stand today the Syro-Malabar Church is mostly restricted to two ecclesiastical provinces in Kerala, where it has two archbishops and nine other bishops. The oriental hierarchy re-established in 1923 by Rome has restricted the activities of the SM church to selected dioceses. What the SMs want is the right to function as an all-IndiaChurch.

Orientalium Ecclesiarum, the Vatican II decree on eastern Catholic churches, is clear on their rights to set up churches wherever they wish. They enjoy the same rights and are under the same obligations, even with respect to preaching the Gospel to the whole world under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff. But the Latin hierarchy in India is in no mood to extend to the SMs this privilege. Twenty years after Vatican II the situation of the Malabar Church is substantially as bad as before.

What the SMs want straight away are dioceses in Bombay, Poona, Delhi, Bangalore and Madras to take care of the spiritual needs of those of their flock who have migrated to these cities. Before the Pope arrived in India I called on the (Latin) archbishop of Bombay, Simon Pimenta. Conceding that justice was on the Syro-Malabar side, he tried arguing that double jurisdiction created problems. But double jurisdiction, as the SMs point out, works not only in Kerala but in Rome itself.

In 1982 the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India formed an inter-ritual committee to look into the matter. Last year they reached a dead end, the Latin bishops harping on unity, even on a common rite for the entire country, the SMs insisting on the liberation of their church. Archbishop Pimenta, the chairman of the conference, is only too ready to refer the matter to Rome, but the Pope apparently wants a local solution.

Travelling through Kerala and sitting through the mass last Saturday, I was struck by how Indian the Malabar Church is. (When I visited the tomb of Sister Alphonsa—one of the two to be beatified—and met nuns who had known her, I discovered that she didn't know a single European language, not even English: something inconceivable for a Goan saint or near-saint.) On the other hand, the Latin Church is cut off from most of India. It is to remedy this state of affairs that the Latin Church is now trying to Indianize itself. On this papal tour the results were for all to see: oil lamps, *aratis* to welcome the Pope, Sanskrit chants, folk dances, patriotic songs. All colourful enough, but quite superficial.

Despite scepticism in the last synod, when the African bishops tried to use it to overturn clerical celibacy, these days inculturation has become a vogue word in the Vatican. Earlier it was 'assimilation', 'adaptation' or even 'incarnation'. But the idea is old and respectable. In 1659 Pope Alexander VII wrote to the missionaries in China expressing the policy of the Church: 'Do not in any way attempt,and do not on any pretext persuade these peoples to change their rites, habits and customs, unless they are openly opposed to religion and good morals. For what could be more absurd than to bring France, Spain, Italy or any other European country over to China?'

At Shillong the Pope, quoting from the Vatican II decree on missionary activity, *Ad Gentes Divinitas*, spoke of the need to adapt Christian life 'to the mentality and character of each culture'. Celebrating the Mass at Kottayam last Saturday, he struck a powerful blow for the Malabar Church. Is it too much to hope that Rome will soon grant this ancient church the right to preach the Gospel where it will, reversing the synod of Diamper and four centuries of colonial suppression?

The Spectator
15 February, 1986

The Pope Learns from Gandhi

Early in the Pope's trip the word had got around that he was going to raise the subject of contraception. The Italians in the Vatican press corps were buzzing with 'news' and *Newsweek*, in an early report, wrote: 'His Indian bishops have advised him against raising the issue of birth control; of angering the Gandhi government. But Vatican officials said the Pope may well speak out against contraception.'

So when the Pope, in his homily at Shivaji Park last Sunday, spoke against 'artificial checks' he surprised few. It was, however, his subtle manner that took one by surprise. He began by quoting *Grudium et Spes*, the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World which is fairly wishy-washy on the subject of contraception: 'When there is a question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life. . .it must be determined by objective standards.' At this point one expected him to go on to Pope Paul VI's controversial 1968 encyclical *Humane Vitae* or even the 1930 encyclical *Casti Conubii Butno*. The Pope quoted Mahatma Gandhi instead, got the Father of the Nation to do the hard work.

We were all taken by surprise. Later that evening as I dined in a restaurant near the Press Centre, broadcasters scurried from table to table trying to learn when Gandhiji took his vow of *brahmacharya (*1906, but none of us could say off hand) and others (Mark Braine of the BBC) suggested on the air that the Pope had quite possibly quoted Gandhi out of context.

That night I was half inclined to think the same (hadn't Gandhiji met Margaret Sanger in 1935? Though for the life of me I couldn't remember what transpired) but subsequent checking up seems to reveal that this was not the case. Not only had the Mahatma felt that carnal union is not meant 'to please but for bringing forth progeny' but also that 'union is criminal in which desire for progeny is absent' (*Young India,* 12 March, 1925). Tendulkar quotes Gandhi as saying: 'It is absurd to say that India is overpopulated and that the surplus population must die. (Whoever said that? But let the point pass) I am sure that if all the land that is available were properly utilised and made to yield to its capacity, it would maintain the whole population.'

The more I read on the subject the more I appreciated what a brilliant tactician the Pope was. Of Gandhi's disapproval of artificial methods of birth control Gyan Chand wrote in his book *Population in Perspective* that 'this fact is widely known but reference to it is, as a rule, now studiously avoided even among the most ardent Gandhiites, the more so by the political leaders in power who have fully adopted family planning as an official policy on empirical grounds without being implicated in debate on basic issues.' We may try to forget Gandhi but we can hardly blame a foreigner who reminds us what our Father said.

Subtle or unsubtle, Gandhian or Catholic, to attack birth control has become one of the riskiest heresies of our day. So it was hardly surprising that the Church in India tried to persuade the Pope to avoid the subject. As a priest in Kerala explained to me: 'We have left the matter to the individual conscience. Abortion we are against but there is hardly a priest in India who criticizes contraception.'

Which brings me to a question I have been pondering on through the length of the Pope's stay in India: is the Indian Church liberal or conservative? On liberation theology (the business with the fishermen in Kerala) it appears conservative, on contraception it appears liberal. But the more I travelled and saw the more it became clear that the Church is neither conservative nor liberal, these words are inappropriate in the context. In both cases it is a question of whether the Church is strong or soft and the answer most clearly is that the Church is soft. It is a Church that does not wish to offend, it is a Church that takes soft options in order to 'live and let live'.

At a press conference last November, just before the Extraordinary Synod of Roman Catholic bishops in Rome, the Belgian Cardinal Gottfried Daneels said that there were now three churches within Catholicism: the Church in the advanced industrial countries, the Church under siege in Eastern Europe and the Church of the Third World. It was a surprising admission for a leading member of the hierarchy to make for Rome does not usually admit to any break in the unity of the Church. The present Pope is neither a Pope of the First World nor a Pope of the Third World; some think he is in a blessed position for he can mediate between the two, others think it an unfortunate position for he does not know the First World or the Third World properly.

Whether it was the political conditions of Poland that shaped him or not (he studied at an underground, unofficial university) it is clear that John Paul II is a strong Pope, a fighter for what he believes in while the Catholic Church in India is quite the opposite. So while it disconcerted some clerics to hear the Pope preach evangelization, that is just what he did in Shillong, one of the most sensitive places in the country for this subject. There are some who like to think that the Pope was merely speaking of 'inculturation' of the Christian message when he quoted the Vatican II document saying that 'Christian life will be adapted to the mentality and character of each culture' but it was clear that for him, as for St Paul before him, inculturation is a missionary strategy, not just a gimmick to placate the government and those Hindus who think the Church in India is not 'Indian' enough. So in Delhi he spoke Hindi, in Calcutta Bengali, in Madras Tamil, in Kerala Malayalam. (In Shillong, the *Telegraph* informed us on 15 January, the Pope would speak 'seven words of Khasi': How generous. The Pope's English is difficult enough to follow—***Braadduz und seestuz in Kriest***—his Tamil must have been incomprehensible; I saw the nuns politely cover their faces and titter when he spoke in Tamil in Madras.)

It is hardly surprising that this Pope's hero is that other strong fighter, Mahatma Gandhi. At Rajghat the Pope praised Gandhiji so unreservedly ('hero of humanity', 'extraordinary man') that the chief Vatican spokesman remarked he had not heard the Pope praise another human being so. (It was a distinct change from the past: as that week's *Organiser* informed us; when Gandhi visited the Vatican in 1932 the Pope refused to see him.) Back in Naples last week John Paul II told Reuters that, 'Gandhi was never a Christian and he never pretended to be one but I have learnt a lot from him. Christians could learn from him how to be Christians.'

Gandhi, unlike the Catholic Church in India today, was an evangelizer; he was also one who believed in carrying the message to the masses by adapting oneself to the local culture. It was only at the age of fifty-two that he gave up Western dress. But when he did it was not just as a gimmick to placate someone: it was so that he could transform the country. Throughout this papal tour one saw the Indian Church trying to give up its Western dress—*aratis*, *bhajans*, *shlokas*, folk dances—but there was little feeling in the exercise, still less a sense of a mission. If the Pope read the situation accurately he must have been a little disappointed.

The Sunday Observer
16 February, 1986

Moksha and the Haridwar Kumbh Mela

Is it enough to bathe in the right river at the right time? Watching the crowds at Haridwar this week it was the inevitable question to ask, inevitable for us of little faith. Can mere bathing *really* cleanse one's sins, mechanical though the bathing be? Surely there is greater logic to karma?

Back in Delhi—away from the crowds, the sun and the overwhelming noise of the *lawdspeakers*—I hear that Swami Agnivesh is on his way to Haridwar to protest against the superstition that bathing in the Ganges is spiritually efficacious.

After attending the Purna Kumbh at Prayag in 1954, Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi wrote a little book of reflections for the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan called, *Kumbha—India's Ageless Festival.* They had none of the cocksure rationalism of our Janata Party labour leader but at the end of it all they were unsure of the value of the *tamasha*: 'It is difficult to gauge how much real spiritual value this traditional holy festival retains today. . . . The Kumbha Mela might serve to remind us of our marvellous spiritual heritage, but how many of the six million pilgrims assembled there did it inspire to strive for a nobler future?' Not quite the question about the value of the *dubki*, but not unrelated. More recently, Bill Aitken in this paper ('Kumbh Mela Wars', 30 March) was similarly sceptical and concluded: 'The Kumbh attracts the orthodox, Northern, Brahmanical element. . . The South being more enlightened look on with amused tolerance, aware that washing never did anyone any harm.'

I concede that a good many of the *yatris* at the mela have an unwholesome hedge-your-bets attitude towards the bathing, rather like the Haryanavi *sadhu* who explained its significance to me saying: '*Kumbh ka ek snan har din ke ek lakh snan barabar hai. . .life insurance ki tarah hai, maro to pachees hazaar, jiyo to das.*' (One bath during the Kumbh is the equivalent of a lakh . . . it's like life insurance, if you die you get twenty-five thousand, if you live you get ten.) But that is not enough to damn the entire Ganga. As for Agnivesh's rationalism, it misses the point and could equally be extended—as, doubtless, Agnivesh himself does—to condemn all idols. But to think an idol a mere superstition is to misunderstand its nature and significance: It is nobody's claim that God reposes in a block of carved stone any more than he does in the marble walls of the Taj Intercontinental lobby. It is that the *bhakt*, unable to apprehend God with a mystic's facility, needs to consecrate the stone idol so that he may concentrate upon God by concentrating upon it.

I like to think that the same holds for bathing in the Ganges. A story I heard from a sadhu in Haridwar this week illustrates this perfectly:

Sitting in their celestial abode Shiva and Parvati were watching a Kumbha Mela in progress at Haridwar. A rumour began to circulate that anyone who bathed in the Ganga at a particular auspicious hour would be absolved of all *paap* (sin) and achieve *mukti* (liberation). Parvati was critical: she felt Shiva had made moksha cheap and thus unwittingly encouraged *paap*.

Shivji decided to visit Earth and see things for himself. Appearing in the form of a dead Brahmin, he lay on the banks of the Ganga at Haridwar. Parvati played the wailing wife. Pilgrims began to stop and ask her if they could be of any help. Parvati would tell them that Shivji had appeared to her in a dream saying her husband could be saved but only if he was touched by a sinless person. There was a catch, though: if the person who touched was not sinless he too would die as her husband had.

It was the auspicious hour. The pilgrims had all had their *snan*, but there were no takers.

Finally a man staggered their way. On hearing of Parvati's dream he consoled her. 'Though I may have drunk liquor all my life one dip in the water is going to wash all my *paap*. I can save your husband.' He then approached the river, full of faith.

After his *dubki*, he bent down to touch the body. In its place stood Shiva. 'So far only you have attained moksha,' Shivji said to the man before vanishing into the sky with Parvati.

The moral hardly needs stating: For those who invest in Ganga *Maiya* with the proper *shraddha* Ganga *Maiya* does indeed purify, not because she is Ganga *Maiya*, but because the *shraddha* has purified. It sounds circular but it isn't.

Of course this means that the *Maiya* can easily become a fetish, of course the mela is awash with counterfeit sadhus, who are busy cadging cigarettes from onlookers while they should be walking in their *jaloos*, counterfeit sadhus whose exhibitionism is testament to their potent *lokeshtna*. But I would rather have it that way, take the good with the bad, the mostly bad, rather have it easy going than opt for the fierce reformist fervour of the Arya Samaj.

Wandering through the various ashrams that have been set up on Pant Dweep I chanced upon the Arya Samaj tent. It was a very different sort of discourse that was in progress here, as the pictures of the heroes displayed showed. One Shri Om Prakash Verma of Yamunanagar was telling us the history of colonized India: '*Naheee ham shaant nahin hue—ladai ladte rahe. Jhansi ki rani ban ke ladai ladi, Bhagat Singh ban ke ladai ladi, Udham Singh ban ke ladai ladi. . .*' (No, we were never quietened—we continued to fight. We fought in the form of the queen of Jhansi, we fought in the form of Bhagat Singh, we fought in the form of Udham Singh.) Once in a while he would stop to break out into a patriotic song:

Sarfaroshi ki tamanna ab hamare dil mein hai
Dekhana hai zor kitna baazue-qatil mein hai
(We now have the desire to lay down our lives,
We now have to see how much strength lies in the arms of the killer)

On and on it went, this catalogue of military prowess and fierce intention, lightened only occasionally by a joke at the expense of the *darpok* Mussalmaan: '*Bhutto Sahib jab phaansi ke takhte pe chale to teen din pehle peshaab chalne lag gaya*' (three days before Bhutto climbed on to the scaffold, he'd started urinating).

I know the Naga sadhus were a fierce bunch, that at the 1760 Kumbh in Haridwar they killed thousands of Vaishnava Sadhus and that at the 1796 Kumbh at Haridwar they were in turn slaughtered by the Sikhs. But the British soon disarmed them and today all they throw at incorrigible photographers (who insist on violating the rules and taking pictures of the nude sanyasis) are orange segments. They are a tame lot who make for the gaiety of the mela. Today it is the ones who travel in vans emblazoned '*Satyarth Prakash padho*' (read the *Satyarth Prakash*) that I fear. For they are the intolerant ones, the ones who fired by a rationalistic patriotic zeal fail to appreciate the subtleties of *shraddha*, fail to see how a dip in a green, sluggish canal can possibly result in moksha.

The Sunday Observer
13 April, 1986

Life and Death at the Kumbha

A few weeks ago at a seminar organized at the India International Centre in New Delhi (raw concrete surfaces, airconditioned hall, Ford Foundation money), one of Rajiv Gandhi's ministers,P. Chidambaran, urged, with perfect seriousness, that the government abolish India's villages. (In the Indian context this is not as weird a demand as it may sound: there is something about the climate that encourages windbag authoritarianism: last year a special number of the magazine put out by the Planning Commission featured twenty 'intellectuals', each demanding that we abolish religion.) It was cheaper to electrify cities than villages. It was cheaper to provide drinking water in cities than in villages, it was cheaper to educate people in cities than in villages. . . . Indeed, he went on, we could dispense with teachers altogether and use televisions instead: human instructors were more likely to be corrupt and prejudiced, and anyway, in the long run, cathode ray tubes were cheaper.

If only the bright Mr Chidambaran had joined us at the Kumbh Mela he would have seen why his homogenization project is as impossible as it is ludicrous. Here,on the streets of Haridwar and on the banks of the Ganga , the sharp-nosed Gujarati mixed with the swarthy Punjabi, the rotund Marwari mingled with the gaunt Uttar Pradesh-ite; mixed and mingled, belched and spat, ate and shat as they prepared to dip themselves in the river, hoping the ablution might cleanse them of their accumulated sins; jostled in the streets and finally even bathed in the same green water yet retained a perfectly clear notion of their difference, a marvellously distinct sense of caste and religion. (In theory the duodecennial festival is *the* occasion when the various sects of Hinduism—priests and laity alike—meet to discuss theological points; most Northern Hindu sects and sadhus come here but in practice there is little exchange: most of them are interested in beating their own drums.)

If myth be trusted, it was differences that created the Kumbh Mela. In the Puranas the ocean is the symbol of life in both its aspects, potential and forever evolving. To help out with evolution the *Devas* and the *Asuras* decided to churn the ocean. A mountain served as the churning rod and around it the two groups coiled a colossal python. As the churning commenced the depths of the water yielded unpleasantnesses: fumes, gases, fires, poisons. Then the boons began: the flying horse, the milch cow, the priceless jewel, the magic moon, the sky chariot, the vibrant lyre, and so on till finally emerged Dhanvantri, the divine healer, who carried in his arms the final prize, the *Kumbha* of *Amrita*, a sip of which was enough to secure immortality.

Once the pot appeared there was a terrible fight over it between the *Devas* and the *Asuras*. In the various Puranas there are various accounts of what happened; according to the one which created the legend of the Kumbh, the *Asuras* being stronger, beat the *Devas* and captured the prize. The *Devas*, however, proved cleverer. One of them assumed the form of a rook and made off with the ambrosial pot. As he flew over earth on his way to heaven, hotly pursued by the *Asuras*, he stopped to rest at four places: Prayag, Ujjain, Nasik and Haridwar. The touch of the *Kumbha* sanctified these four spots where in rotation every twelve years a Kumbha festival is celebrated.

If there was violence in the origins, the tradition has been kept up. This time at 2.06 a.m. on 14 April the holiest period for bathing began when the sun entered Aries and Jupiter entered Aquarius. All night the crowd milled the ghats. At 6.30 a.m. someone slipped by Pant Dweep, an island in the Ganga. Bodies began to pile on each other and a stampede ensued in which forty-seven died and many others broke their arms and just got crushed. It was the first stampede in the two-month-long festival and one hopes it was the last, but stampede or no stampede the bathing will go on.

Death is nothing new at the Kumbh Mela. Before the British settled in our midst we had few records at what transpired at the Kumbhs (though Hiuen Tsang has left us an account of the AD 644 Kumbh) so it is difficult to say how lethal the festival was in antiquity. F.G. Raper in *Asiatic Researches* tells us of the battle at the 1760 Kumbh at Haridwar when the Saivite and the Vaishnavite sadhus fought each other over the question of who would bathe first. Approximately 18,000 people died in the scuffle, the Vaishnavites taking most of the beating. For years after that the Vaishnava sadhus were not allowed to bathe at Haridwar till the British finally stepped in and disarmed the sadhus. The 1796 set-to at Haridwar was equally ferocious and constituted a serious reverse for the forces of Shiva. Dr Hunter and Captain Thomas Hardwick record (*Asiatic Researches*, Vol. 6) that on 10 April between 12,000 and 14,000 Sikh cavalrymen from Patiala and Budiya entered Haridwar and tried to occupy the bathing ghats. It was an unevenly matched fight. The Saivite sadhus were trying to get to the ghats on foot and possessed only the odd rifle: the Sikhs carried spears and more sophisticated fire power. The Sikhs lost only twenty men, the Saivites some 5,000.

The numbers at a Kumbha Mela make Woodstock and even the Haj at Mecca appear like picnics. In one day two million people took a dip at Haridwar and another five million had already bathed there since the Mela began in February. Haridwar may be an ancient town but it's not really built for two million people and the resulting crush is not pleasant. Tom Coryat visited Haridwar in 1608, dubbed it the 'Capital of Shiva' and was impressed by the speed at which the Ganga flowed through the town. Later travellers saw less sublime sights. The Daniells were the first European artists to depict Haridwar (1789) and they observed that there was just one street in the town, a street crammed with sweetshops and dense with the smoke of pyres. F.G. Raper visiting Haridwar in 1808 recorded that every fourth shop sold sweetmeats, an obsession that endures. Orange was definitely the dominant colour this time: the orange of the sadhu's dress and the sticky orange coloured *jalebis* that were frying in front of every sweetshop.

Orange—or, strictly speaking, saffron—is the colour of renunciation and a sadhu or sanyasi is one who has renounced the glory of this world. Unfortunately most of the sadhus who come here are only too involved in the glory of their sects and this vanity makes their spiritual claims sound like a poor joke. The vanity is doubtless encouraged by the stupid photographers—all too often from France and Italy and, alas, themselves dressed in orange—who unwittingly incite exhibitionism. For years now there has been no serious attempt by the press to cover the Kumbh; the whole show is—rather facilely—treated as a 'photo opportunity' and the (forbidden) pictures of the naked ash-smeared Naga sadhus—whom Alexander's men called the gymnosophists—are the most prized. (One would have thought the novelty would wear away after they had seen a few thousand flaccid grey pricks but for the idiots who click for a living this is the high point of the Mela.) For a serious student of Hindu society and religion there is a lot to be learnt at the Kumbh but there are few takers: the foreign pressmen largely chase the exotic story while the Indian press corps tend to go in for the 'administrative' story (how much money spent, how many hospitals, medical units, sewage tanks etc.).

Both approaches are about as intelligent as that of the rationalist who visits Kumbh to 'protest' against the 'superstition' that bathing in the Ganga can wash away sin, quite forgetting that it is—as always—the quality of one's faith that cleanses. This year the leading rationalist windbag is Janata party politician Swami Agnivesh, who too rigs up in orange gear (it's a free country). In his easy rationalism he is like

Rajiv's miniister who would abolish India's villages—as penetrating in his vision and as likely to meet with success.

The Spectator
24 May, 1986

The Great Betrayal

In seven weeks it was done, the frontiers
decided,
A continent for better or worse
divided.
The next day he sailed to England,
where he quickly forgot
The case, as a good lawyer must.
Return he would not,
Afraid, as he told his Club, that he
might get shot.

—Auden

Earlier this year I spent a month in Lahore enquiring about 1947 and all that. Two weeks after I had arrived I became aware I had been playing a game: once I became aware of it the game became boring and I dropped it.

'They may not admit this to an Indian,' an old journalist from the left had briefed me soon after my arrival, 'but people here have begun to question the genesis of Pakistan.' My game was this: in conversation I would be the one who spoke innocuously in praise of Jinnah, the Muslim leader in 1947, and rehearsed the arguments about the necessity of Partition. Often this would induce the other person to air his doubts or even outright condemnation. There was little about history that I learnt from this kind of conversation yet the emotional pleasure was great and I persisted with the gambit for days without a proper awareness of motives.

It may have been a boring game but it taught me something important about myself. I am a child of the Partition. My parents were two of the approximately ten million refugees Partition created and like most of the ten million they lost almost everything they had. Most important, they lost Lahore and with Lahore they lost the Punjab. (Used to the broad spaces of Lahore they could not settle in the claustrophobic, largely rural society of East Punjab.) They went to Bombay where they met, they became part of the Punjab Diaspora of 1947 that has gone almost entirely unremarked among the movements of our time.

I was born ten years after that. I have never wished for a war with Pakistan. I am guilty of many terrible poses but I do not believe I have ever, even in jest, made a rude remark about Muslims. (The Arabs are another matter.) I have lived—for long periods—unselfconsciously in Muslim homes. It is not just a matter of my best friends being Muslims, my adopted brother is a Muslim, as are his wife and children. As things stand I shall almost certainly marry a Muslim.

My secret thrill at hearing Pakistanis question the birth of Pakistan cannot be put down to any simple prejudice. If I were an ordinary Hindu bigot it would be understandable and, in this case, strangely reassuring. But not only am I not a bigot, I like to think I believe in the 'hard facts' of history. Things happen. I can sympathize with a man who is upset because his wife has just left him: ten years later if he continues to make a fuss about her departure I find him pathetic.

Intellectually, I have always accepted the existence of Pakistan. Emotionally—as I learnt in Lahore two months ago—there is still a great resistance. What is significant about this is not that it is a private dichotomy: I believe most of Hindu north India feels this way. But one should not run away with this: it does not mean that the 'Hindu elite' in Delhi is preparing to wipe out Pakistan. I suppose there are a few fantasists who contemplate doing that but I have not come across a single responsible Indian who maintains that such a 'war to the end' is either desirable or even possible. But the fact is there are a lot of powerful emotions about Partition which we just put the lid on soon after 1947: forty years on they are beginning to tumble out. The only way to grow up is to recognize them.

For the past twelve months, twice a week on Tuesdays and Saturdays, over hundred million Indians went through such a cathartic exercise. Considering these were peacetime massacres and migrations without parallel in the history of the world one would have thought Indian television would have addressed itself to them earlier, but then television here has only come of age in the past two years. *Buniyaad* (a 104-part soap opera which started out in Lahore and traced the history of a Punjabi family through Partition to Delhi) brought together more Indians than almost any other television programme ever has. (Only Mrs Gandhi's funeral was viewed by a large number.)

When it began it was difficult to think of Masterji and Lajoji becoming part of the mythological pantheon of modern India. He started out as a nationalist prig and laughed once a day because he believed it necessary to get the exercise: she was a giggling girl with few serious interests. Till the end they addressed each other with the overpolite suffix *'ji'* but the stiffness vanished from their relationship early on. Even before they became refugees they became—and remained till the end—the simple suffering sort who pull through because of their quiet strength. In their time they were unconventional, marrying against his parents' wishes: through their lives they flirted with armed revolution and religious reform yet they are essentially *conservative* figures. But they did more than reinforce the essential conservatism of the Indian middle classes; they provoked the country to look again at 1947 and talk about the claims and counter-claims of the division. (The name of the serial, *Buniyaad*, I always understood as 'foundation'; checking up the entry in Sardar Maya Singh's classic *Punjabi Dictionary* of 1895, I find a subsidiary meaning: 'a superior proprietary right in land'.)

Before I sat down to write this piece I watched the first fifteen hours of *Buniyaad* on a video machine, up to the point the family flees Lahore in August 1947 without Masterji, who is lost, presumed dead. I knew it was historically inadequate, technically unsatisfactory and even sentimentally mawkish. I had not reckoned on how moving it would be. Again and again I burst out into a peculiar choking sob that came from the chest.

My mother had watched *Buniyaad* for a year with fanatic devotion. I now asked her to record her experience of Partition on a tape machine and post me the cassette:

> The emotions of the period, the tremendous bewilderment,are hard for me to describe in words. . . .
>
> That summer I was to appear for my final BA examination. There were riots all over Lahore, in fact there was so much arson and looting that one did not know if one would be able to sit for the exams or not. We had to read at night by a kerosene light. Even to go and sit the exam was such a frightening experience because you never knew what would happen to you on the way. We were living in constant fright of the 'enemy' as it was called coming and attacking our homes. At night I remember somebody or the

> other sitting in a quiet corner on top of the house and keeping vigil to see if there were mobs coming in our direction.
>
> I remember distinctly a couple of nights when we heard mobs running across the fields with slogans like *Allah ho Akbar* and I remember how frightened we used to be. My little sister Gita was once hidden by Daddy in a *tandoor* outside the house and told not to make the slightest noise.
>
> The older girls, Minnie and myself, were considered more responsible. We were given Molotov cocktails and told to stand on the balconies and to throw these on the Muslims from above if they tried to come in. At one point Minnie and I were given a small bottle of poison by Daddy with strict instructions that this was to be used by us only as an *absolute last resort.*

That was just before Partition. On 15 August while Nehru was busy redeeming his tryst with destiny my mother was in Bombay studying for another degree. The rest of the family was in Lahore. My grandfather—who used to teach botany at the veterinary college and was therefore a government servant—had opted to serve in Pakistan. ('The problem of Hindustan and Pakistan,' he used to say, 'is for politicians.') On 28 August—curiously the very day my other set of grandparents fled Lahore—an army convoy came home and persuaded my grandfather to leave with his wife and four daughters. They left in ten minutes. Each was allowed to carry one small object. My aunt Minnie packed herself a meal saying she didn't want to die on an empty stomach.

On 1 September came the biggest blow. All India Radio announced that M.G. Singh, an uncle and the person who was dearest to my mother, had been stabbed eight times by a group of murderers and had died on the way to hospital. He was the registrar of the university and had come back to Lahore to supervise the payment of staff salaries with an assurance of full protection from the governor.

> The day I heard *Mamaji* was killed I shut my *Bhagwad Gita* never to open it again for the next twenty years. He was all that I had prayed for. I remember his last letter to me: 'I am going back to Lahore with full military escort. Please do not worry about me. I will be safe. I hope. He is our protector. . . .'
>
> Well, Daddy got a job eventually and they moved out of the garage where they were living in Amritsar. I got a scholarship. Minnie gave up studying to support the family. Daddy and Ma never lived comfortably, though. For many of us it was a life of

> very little faith and very hard struggles outwardly. No wonder many of us had psychological breakdowns. I think of Masterji in *Buniyaad*, not to mention those in our own family.

The first problem featured Gita, the eight-year-old who was hidden in the *tandoor*. Six months later my grandmother found her trying to open a jammed cupboard. She had a stony look. 'I am going to take revenge for what they did to *Mamaji.*'

Breakdown followed breakdown. The Partition hallucinations multiplied. Gita became impossibly violent. The home broke up because my grandmother refused to send Gita to an asylum. (My grandfather died a cripple unable to walk because Gita once attacked him and at his age the bones refused to set.)Eventually Gita had to be taken away. She died in an asylum outside Delhi, murdered by an inmate who hit her on the head with a lead pipe.

Mental illness dogged the other girls who had been through Partition. Two other maternal sisters died violent deaths—one murdered, the other by suicide—after lonely lives made desperate by insanity.

It is remarkable how few Lahore Hindus and Sikhs seemed aware of what was going to happen to them. They believed, naïvely, that they could continue to live as a minority in Pakistan. Yet, all along, there were people who seemed to have been able to foretell the tragedy. In *Divide and Quit* (London, 1961) Penderel Moon recounts a conversation with the senior superintendent of police in Delhi towards the end of March 1947. 'Once a line of division is drawn in the Punjab,' the SSP said, 'all Sikhs to the west of it and all Muslims to the east of it will have their—chopped off.'

Of course part of the false security lay in each one believing he would be on the right side of the line. Penderel Moon recalled meeting a Sikh leader in 1942 who insisted that the boundary would be drawn along the Chenab. Moon told him it would be drawn between Amritsar and Lahore somewhere near the Wagah rest-house on the Grand Trunk Road. In 1946 the Sikh believed the Ravi river would form the boundary, keeping Lahore in India. But Moon was right: the border outpost is at Wagah.

In Lahore I picked up various rumours that had buzzed around the city in August 1947. One rumour had it that the Ravi would form the boundary: another that the Bari Doab Canal which runs through Lahore would, thus partitioning the city like Berlin. (My mother's family lived 200 yards away from the canal on the 'Indian' side.)

Radcliffe, who had arrived in Delhi on 8 July, had submitted the Partition award on 10 August and signed the alterations by the 12th. Mountbatten received it on the 13th but didn't release it till the 16th after both India and Pakistan had achieved their independence because, as he explained, 'I felt it would be much better to let them have the joy of their Independence Day, and then face the misery after the situation.'

Mountbatten's haste in getting out was inexplicable. (He chose 15 August, he admitted, because it was the second anniversary of the Japanese surrender. Attlee had wanted the transfer to take place before June 1948.) Why couldn't the award have been announced in good time *before* Partition so that those—like the Sikhs—who felt cheated by it could appeal before a tribunal rather than resort to knives and axes? After having ruled India for two hundred years why were the British so anxious to leave?

Richard Hough in his biography *Edwina* (London, 1983) has suggested that Mountbatten was anxious to get home in time for the royal wedding on 20 November 1947. The suggestion is too fantastic to be seriously considered. But Sir Evan Jenkins, the governor of the Punjab, had given Mountbatten several clear warnings that the Sikhs intended to start trouble if the British relinquished control before announcing an award that did not take care of their interests. On 13 July he gave yet another warning requesting Mountbatten to announce the Radcliffe Award before 15 August 'to stop panic and the mad hurrying of populations from one dominion to another'. Instead Mountbatten set up a pathetically inadequate Boundary Force of 50,000 men. In the massacres that ensued it is difficult to estimate the number of those killed: Moon puts it at under 200,000, Seervai at 600,000 and popular estimate at a million.

Of course it could be argued that Partition made a Punjab massacre inevitable, that no matter what precautions had been taken there would have been a disaster. Back in October 1938 Penderel Moon, upset by the way the Congress ministries had handled things, suggested to Sir Sikander Hyan Khan, the chief minister of Punjab, that Pakistan might be a good idea after all. The presence of sizeable minorities in each nation would ensure fair treatment, he added. Sir Sikander's response is worth noting.

> How can you talk like this? You've been long enough in western Punjab to know the Muslims there. Surely you can see that Pakistan would be an invitation to them to cut the throats of ev-

> ery Hindu Bania. . . .I do hope I won't hear you talk like that again. *Pakistan would mean a massacre.*

In less than eighteen months, however, Sir Sikander had signed the famous Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League asking for Pakistan.

No one came out with any credit. Jinnah, Gandhi, Mountbatten, Wavell, Nehru, each was in his own way responsible for the holocaust that followed. It is as if each did what he could to bring about this blood-letting.

Jinnah pursued Partition with a singlemindedness that was unique amongst the political actors of the day. That is the conventional judgement on Jinnah and he has been—in England as much as in India—portrayed as the villain of the piece. (Both the box office accounts of this business, Attenborough's *Gandhi* and Lapierre and Collins's *Freedom at Midnight* share this bias.)

Their portrait of Jinnah omits mention that he was the author of the 1916 Lucknow Pact between the Muslim League and Congress and that he was for long considered the 'ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity'. But all that was of the past. More to the point there is evidence that Jinnah considered the 1940 Lahore Resolution a mere 'tactical move'. (He is supposed to have said so to a few friends in Lahore.)

Whatever Jinnah privately thought about the Lahore Resolution, by 1946 it had become the rallying cry for many young Muslims who did not appreciate his political manoeuvres. Even so, Jinnah—and the League behind him—did relent once in 1946 and accepted a proposal to keep India united. It was the last opportunity we had to avert Partition and it was Gandhi who spurned it. It is something the Punjabi Hindu and Sikh who lived through the period has never been able to forgive Gandhi for.

From 24 March to June 1946 three members of the Labour Cabinet—Pethwick Lawrence, Cripps and Alexander—conducted talks with the viceroy and various Indian leaders on the subject of an interim government and the procedure for framing a new Indian Constitution. Initially it appeared that the cabinet mission was favouring Congress: 'We cannot allow a minority to place a veto on the advance of a majority,' Attlee had announced in the Commons before the mission began its work.

There was a predictable deadlock in the negotiations. Then on 16 May the cabinet mission proposed a statement which, while rejecting Pakistan, gave a three-tier solution to save the union. The details of this solution do not concern us here except to note that the union government was to be responsible for defence, communications and foreign policy alone. All other matters were to be dealt with by the provinces or the three groups that were to be set up. (Each province would belong to one group or the other, but it was open to any province to opt out of the group it was in, but after the constitution was framed and elections held.) That was the long-term plan. The short-term plan involved the setting up of the interim government that would take charge till independence. I shall not go into the details of the differences between the League and Congress over the parity of representation in the union executive or whether or not the grouping was to be compulsory. The upshot of it was that even though there was not parity at the centre between Congress and the League, Jinnah accepted the cabinet mission proposals, albeit reluctantly. He did not want a 'moth-eaten' Pakistan and this was the best he could get for the moment at any rate. The Congress Working Committee, unable to make up its mind, retired to the hills.

On 16 June the viceroy announced that he contemplated an interim government to be formed by 26 June, composed of six Congress Hindu representatives, five Muslim Leaguers, one Sikh, one Parsi and one Christian. It was 'an expedient' to save the short-term plan not a long-term constitutional arrangement. Paragraph eight of the statement declared that, 'it is the intention of the Viceroy to proceed with the formation of an interim government', whether or not any or both of the major parties co-operated.

For a few days it appeared that a solution was in sight. A cartoon in the *Hindustan Times* had the cabinet mission going home under a caption, 'All's well that ends well'.

It was at this point that Gandhi struck. He raised the problem of the 'nationalist Muslim'. Congress, he felt, should be allowed to nominate a Muslim candidate from its own quota if it so wished. It was a perfectly decent point but the most inappropriate occasion to make it. But Gandhi was adamant. He said he was following the prompting of his inner voice. In an interview with Wavell some months later he explained what he had in mind was a distinction between 'right' and 'duty': Congress could waive its right to nominate the nationalist Muslim but could not shirk its duty to him.

With this single obstinacy Gandhi shirked his duty to united India. If Congress would not accept, Wavell was in a very tricky situation as he could not really invite Jinnah, the minority leader, to head the interim government, yet this was exactly what paragraph eight of the 16 June statement required he do. Wavell went back on his word and Jinnah felt betrayed. In response he announced his 'Direct Action Day' on 16 August.

The Calcutta riots, the first of the Partition massacres, began on 16 August during the League's observance of Direct Action Day. The Muslims started the riots though after the Sikh taxi-drivers had joined the fray things were equally poised. Then there were violent reactions to the Calcutta riots all over the country: Bombay (from 1 September), Noakhali in East Bengal (10 October), Bihar (25 October), Garmukteshwar in Uttar Pradesh (November). Calcutta had resulted in 4,000 deaths, in Noakhali the toll went up to 7,000.

The trouble in Punjab started in March 1947, a day after the Khizar ministry fell. There were riots in Lahore, Multan, Attock, Rawalpindi and Amritsar. At first the targets were Sikh and Hindu moneylenders and businessmen. By August the Sikhs in Amritsar had begun their massacres of Muslims and Lahore retaliated. It was time for my grandparents to up and go.

The Spectator
8 August, 1987

Interviews

Interviews were what Dhiren loved most for that was when he was at his mischievous best. His friends did caution him though that he would soon run out of victims. Understandably, no one interviewed by Dhiren Bhagat rushed to give him another one—especially not the politicians.

Maneka Gandhi

'I Make a Very Conscious Effort to Block out My Early Memories'

I'd like to start this like a biography, so I'll start with your ancestors. There have been these remarks about how your family were not our sort of people. . I don't know very much about your family except that on your mother's side your grandfather was Sir Datar Singh, and on your father's side your great-grandfather was the deputy political agent in Quetta—
No, not great-grandfather. My other grandfather.

Sorry, I read that in the Telegraph *report on your uncle's death. . .*
My mother's father was Sir Datar Singh, who was the founder of dairy farming in India. He was India's representative to the FAO and after independence the agricultural adviser to the government. And then he retired to a farm, 800 acres in Bhopal and 300 acres in Delhi which were given when they came as refugees. Compensation. And. . . let me see, on my father's side my grandfather, Sardar Baldev Singh, was the political agent and then he was adviser to, what's that chief minister's name, Nirlep Kaur's father?

But before that, were they agricultural people? What do you know. . .
My mother's side, they had 10,000 acres in Montgomery.

When did they acquire it, after the Triple Project. . .?
No, no, no. I don't know when this was. I'm very, very bad at my family's history. You'll have to ask other members of my family (*giggles*). All I know is that they had at least 10,000 acres. It was a joint family. There's even a railway station named after them (*laughs*).

What was it called?
The Sir Datar Singh railway station (*laughs*).

In Montgomery?
Yes. Then, they were refugees. And they came to India. On my father's side they were all administrative people. Government people. They were

not land people. Army, DMs, DCs. And my grandfather as I've told you was the first political agent.

Political agent or deputy political agent?
I don't know.

Let's move to your mother. What did she study?
My mother did her BA in psychology from Miranda House and then she got a scholarship, a Rotary scholarship, and went abroad for two years.

Where to?
San Diego.

She did her Masters in psychology there?
Nobody's asked me this before. I don't know. I just don't know. I mean do you know your parents' qualifications?

Well, yes. But you aren't interviewing me. Your father. . .
My father studied in Quetta and then he joined the army.

Where were you born?
In Delhi.

What are your earliest memories? Of Delhi?
I haven't any.

Haven't any earliest memories?
I haven't any of Delhi. I was here for one year and then we were posted out.

What are your earliest memories? What age, four, five?
I don't have very many early memories. You know, I make a very conscious effort to block it. I'm not very interested.

Why do you?
I don't know.

Surely there's some clue to your personality here...
No, I don't think. . .Let me see, we were posted from here to Ahmednagar where my brother and sister were born and from there my father was posted to England.

How old were you then?
I was six. For two years...

Was he the military attaché?
No, no, nothing so grand. He was a captain and had gone for a training course, Signals. Electronics course. In a village called Watchfield which was in the Swindon area. And I studied in a NAAF school. You know the Navy Army Air Force schools... We came back when I was eight. From there we were posted to Bangalore. And I joined standard III in Sophia High School. Our first house there was next to a slaughter-house and it was from there that I started.... You know my main interest is animal preservation, not wildlife preservation, just animal preservation.

Are you a vegetarian?
Yes, I am. Because of that you know. . .the drains were always full of blood and ... From there we changed houses after a while.

What else did you do in your childhood? Did you read a lot?
Yes, my parents never gave us any toys. We were always given a lot of books. We weren't very well off so we all joined libraries from the time we were five or six or seven. I think the three of us, our main interest till today is just reading.

Who are your favourite authors?
Eclectic, you know. I don't have a favourite author but I have favourite subjects.

What are your subjects?
The kind of subject I have, I don't even remember the authors. I study books, no, not study books, I read books mainly to do with the mind, you know. This is not pompous. What I mean is studies on the mind.

You mean things like Gilbert Ryle's Concept of the Mind*?*
No, no, no. I'm talking about training. Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain. Discoveries made in America. Training schedules. Memorex systems. How the mind can be sort of expanded. Do anything you want.

Have you expanded your mind?
No, no, I haven't. There's nobody to train me. I'd love to be trained but . . . I've always been very interested, right since the beginning, so I mainly read books like that. At the moment I'm reading a book called, what, *The Possibility of the Impossible*, which is again, a *technical* book, with different paragraphs on what people are doing all over the world. How they train psychics for warfare, and how they make them work in hospitals. . .

What about psychics in politics?
Well, I think you need them definitely (*giggles*). I think if they had to go into politics they wouldn't go in because they'd be so *appalled* at what the other person is thinking and what he is saying. Sometimes it's better not to know.

One hears reports that Mrs Gandhi has been prescribed fifty-six padnamashkars *by Tripathi's tantrics. . .*
No, but I'm . . . I feel you're confusing the two. You know mind bending is a scientific thing, you know, mind expansion. It's nothing to do with astrology and such things. . .

Back to your childhood. . .
I was at a lot of schools. I started at a convent. After that, in the VIth VIIth and VIIIth, I studied at the Scindia Kanya Vidyalaya in Gwalior which was not really interested in studies at all. They were more interested in singing, dancing, the arts. They were more interested in refining young women for. . . marriage (*giggles*), I think.

Did you feel yourself refined?
(*Laughs.*) In the VIIth and VIIIth? It was a very beautiful school (*laughs*).

When did your interest in journalism begin?
Well, I was always interested in writing, I was always writing. Always. Children's poems. . .(*Giggles.*)

When did you stop writing poems?
I don't know. I must have stopped as soon as I realized they were very bad (*giggles*).

What age was this at?
(*Loud giggles.*) Very early!

What did you write after that?
Then I went to Sanawar. In the IXth, Xth and XIth. There I won the Cub Reporters' prize, which was a prize given for the best writer. I was the main contributor to the magazine. In fact they reproduced a piece of mine eleven years later, last year, as the best piece they had.

Were your parents interested in gurus and holy men?
My parents were devout Sikhs. My mother's family was very attached to Anandmayee Maa. I had a lot of faith in her, not in the sense of ritual or anything, but in the sense that she was a very good person.

What do you make of Dhirendra Bhramachari?
Well. . . no comment (*laughs*).

Did you ever learn yoga from him?
I don't think anybody ever learnt yoga from him (*laughs*).

After Sanawar you studied at Delhi University, didn't you?
Yes, I went to LSR (Lady Shri Ram) where I did political science. I did one year there and then I got married.

What were your political views at that point?
Zero.

You didn't learn very much from your doing political science then?
No.

So, when you married Sanjay Gandhi, you didn't have very clear political ideas.
I had none. I had none. It wasn't a matter of clear or not clear. I just had none. You must remember I was from an army background. 99.9 per cent of my relatives don't have the faintest idea what's going on. Then I got married.

Was there opposition in your family to your getting married?
Yes. My parents felt he was much older and none of us knew a thing about what kind of. . .

What kind of what?
What kind of set up. . . But Sanjay was a much maturer person. . .

Mrs Gandhi now suggests she disapproved of you from the beginning. Were you aware of her disapproval?
No. I wasn't aware of it at the time. She was very nice to me. I hardly knew her, you know, because my mother was very strict and she always insisted I was home by 9.30 p.m. So I had dinner with the family and then used to be dropped back. And at dinner, I mean, you hardly, I don't know. . . In any case, I was very, very young. I wasn't even eighteen.

Later, in 1975, did you and Sanjay urge her to declare the Emergency?
That's not true at all. In fact, it's another, er, it's another silly story. Because I remember when the Emergency was declared, I was on holiday in Kashmir with a friend of mine and I came back much later and I didn't have the faintest idea.

You mean your mother-in-law had lost the court case and had been unseated and you decided to go on a holiday?
I had gone on a holiday by myself.

After the Allahabad judgement?
That came while I was still on holiday. My first year had finished and the Karan Singhs wrote to me and said, would you like to come because, you know, because exams had just finished and I was very young. My interests were completely different. The dogs. . .

Kashmir seems to have been a convenient place for your family. If I'm not mistaken, your brother and sister were sent to Kashmir just before your father died...
Yes (*solemnly*). So? . . . That's a silly tie-up.

And Sanjay was supposed to have been in Kashmir in 1964 when he was accused of stealing automobiles in Delhi...
Yes, he was in Kashmir then, because I have a letter, you know, which my mother-in-law gave me which he wrote to her from Kashmir. . . when that car incident is supposed to have taken place.

Kashmir seems to have been a very convenient place to go to...
I think lots of people in Delhi go there in the summer. Anyway, then I came back . . . and then I came back. . . I don't remember when I came back, and I didn't have the faintest idea what was going on and I didn't change my lifestyle or anything, so I still hung around in jeans and went to college and attended college from nine to five. And nobody, it never made any difference to anybody in college, because we were as, in JNU, in my class particularly, as ignorant of what was happening.

Ignorant of the Emergency in JNU!
In my class. They had all finished school and they were two years younger to me, they were little, little children, and we talked about German, about how we could wangle scholarships to Germany and . . . (*Laughs.*)

You mean during the Emergency you and your friends were only talking about wangling scholarships to Germany?
Really. I mean it's, it's difficult. . . but not everybody was so terribly involved. Life went on as before. . .

I was at Elphinstone College in Bombay then and I too had just joined college but nobody could talk of anything else but the Emergency. . .
It was something like. . . For me it was something like, in the eye of the storm, see nothing. I was the least, you know, being politically unaware, and. . . I was zero. I wasn't interested at that time. Gradually, yes, it cropped up.

You had been a student of politics. . . This was a pretty important stage in the political life of the country. . .
It never occurred to me like that.

Why not?
No, it didn't. You see, I was a new bride. All the time during the Emergency the only thing I was aware of was that I was very much in love with Sanjay. . . My life really centred round Sanjay, totally.

You did begin to edit Surya *then. . .*
But you must remember what sort of magazine it was then. There were no political articles in it.

When did it turn political?
After the elections were lost.

Didn't you think your husband's behaviour during the Emergency was, to say the least, controversial?
Controversial? To you. Not controversial to me. Now you're asking what are called, *pointed* questions, you've already made up your mind about what you want to ask, what you want to hear. It's nothing I'm ashamed about, that I have to lie about.

When did you first become aware of politics?
You are asking me when I became aware. I became aware when Sanjay was at the receiving end. I felt what was being done to Sanjay was totally unfair.

How would you know if it was unfair? You've said you weren't aware of what was going on during the Emergency so how could you be so sure he was being unfairly blamed?
I felt Sanjay was being made the scapegoat for everything. Ultimately, everything came back to Sanjay. The chief ministers shared no blame, the ministers shared no blame, the government shared no blame. . . all the people in charge were now on the other side accusing Sanjay. . . If you remember in those two years he was blamed for everything.

Do you think he deserved any of the blame or did he deserve none of the blame?
If you ask me specific questions, I'll give you specific answers. I can't give you general answers.

Do you think there were any irregularities in the functioning of Maruti? In the Family Planning programme?
How would I know? I am not in Maruti. I don't think there were any irregularities. Family Planning was a government programme.

You say that after the '77 elections you began to identify yourself with the politics of Sanjay Gandhi. Did this identification proceed from personal considerations of being his wife or did it proceed from some sort of ideological commitment?
Now you're talking *absolute* garbage. Every single thing that happens in life stems from something personal and we try to cloak it in very, very, very heavy terms like 'ideological'. . . I know everybody in politics is in it because of something personal. Everything you do starts from something personal, not because you're ideological, but because you're interested. . .

What I want to know is, did your support for Sanjay Gandhi's peculiar politics, stem from some prior—
Look, I don't know what you're trying to manoeuvre in this interview but what I'm saying is at JNU, during the Emergency, I had absolutely no idea. Even after the Emergency, I was concerned with what was happening to Sanjay after the Emergency. So don't go round and round and just come back to, did you support the Emergency or not, because that's basically what you want to ask.

Now that you're a political person in your own right, no longer just Sanjay Gandhi's wife. . .
I'm not saying that.

Right. So as a political person who runs a political party no doubt you have views on various periods of the country's history. The Emergency was a pretty crucial period in the country's history.
There's nothing written that a political person has to talk about everything. Right?

No.

You can be asked but you may prefer not to answer. The Emergency is the only thing that seems to interest you.

It interests a lot of people.

It happened so many years ago, there are so many things that have happened since. . .

You say you weren't aware of the Emergency then. Looking back at it now, do you have any regrets about the Emergency? Do you feel that things should have been done differently?

My main regret about the Emergency is that I think Sanjay, well, not Sanjay, I think the government made one very, very crucial mistake: that is, they cut off all feedback to them. I'm sure they weren't monsters sitting there or inhuman people or anything like that. I'm sure if they had the feedback they would have been able to correct anything that was going wrong at a very early stage, if it was going wrong.

You said 'Sanjay, well, not Sanjay, the government' : but do you feel it was also Sanjay's mistake to cut off feedback?

I'm sure it was a mistake of Sanjay's in the sense that, if he wanted, if he had, if he felt, well, let me see, that, press censorship was unnecessary, he could have done something about it.

Did Sanjay oppose the decision to go in for the '77 elections? Did he think that a mistake?

I don't think he had a say one way or another. It was a government decision.

What do you have to say about the following letter you are supposed to have written to your mother: 'I hope Uncle Minna dies a gory death, I have run through all my schemes of kidnapping his children, poisoning his wife's food etc., and now I give up.'

Yes.

Do you deny you wrote that?

Certainly not (*smirks*). I never denied that at any stage. You're bringing up something that's been finished one year ago. Of course I had written it. I'd written it when I was fifteen and it was a very, very public school, immature letter. And, it was written to my mother who was going through a lot of family problems. . . And I was in school, I think I was in the Xth standard, or the XIth standard. There are so many things everyone writes to their parents in their letters. . .

Well, I've never written anything of this sort. Don't you think this sort of letter could hound you in later life, when you stand for public office?
I don't think so. It's a letter written by a little girl. . .

A little girl of fifteen or sixteen? Do you have any regrets that you wrote this?
No, I don't have any regrets. It was a very childish letter.

But one can have regrets about childish behaviour!
One can have regrets about childish behaviour as a whole, yes, but. . . you know your questions on the whole, are much too leading.

I am now going to ask you about a report in a Delhi paper last year. In an article Mohammed Yunus wrote. . .
I'm not going to comment on that at all. Because I just think it's not worth commenting on at all.

You don't think it's worth commenting on at all? Do you think it's all false?
Unfortunately you've picked up from the papers all the things that come out as gossip. You haven't picked up a single thing that is factual (*raises her voice*). No, it's not. You are interested in gossip. I have already said the whole thing seems to have come from a very sick person.

Your father, I gather, during the Emergency. . .
No. You're just interested in gossip. You haven't asked me a single question that I even consider serious. Ask me proper questions. So many interviewers come and they ask me proper questions.

What sort of questions do you consider proper?
Just general. . . questions. I don't know. I'm not going to give you something like that.

OK, I'll ask you a 'proper' question. What do you think of Chandrashekhar's padyatra*?*
I think it's a good idea.

Would you support him in his attempts to become Prime Minister?
Not just on the basis of the *padyatra.*

On the basis of his record of twenty years in politics?
Er, I don't know.

When I ask you a 'proper' question, you say you don't know. What sort of questions do you know about? I know very well that you are not going to make a new policy statement of your party in this interview. So what do I ask you about?
You're the one asking.

Right. That's why I think it's proper to ask you questions about things that have appeared in the press about your life, to get your views on these events.
No. I don't think it's proper at all. Why don't you ask me something that has wider interest?

Well, I think you're a very, young person and I don't think you're in a position to make very important remarks about wider things. You have played a rather limited political role so far.
Then tell me Dhiren, why are you here doing the interview at all?

Because you are arguably the most important person of my generation in the country but your importance stems from your strange biography. That's why I am asking you about your life. As you said, everything you do starts from something personal. . .

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Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao

The Man Who Would Be King

Interviewing India's superman is a bit like taking a westbound flight from Sahar: no sooner have you gone to bed the alarm rings. My interview was scheduled for four in the morning. As the car made its progress from the Secunderabad Club to NTR's bungalow in Hyderabad's commercial district, Abids, all I could see from the window was darkness punctuated by infrequent street lamps. The bungalow was like any other filmi *bungalow—pink walls, outsized chandeliers, a marble floor patterned in black and white squares.*

I had heard reports of how NTR liked film producers and members of his cabinet to prostrate before him when they sought audience. Of course no one I spoke to admitted that they prostrated themselves. So I decided to check his penchant in another way. As soon as I was admitted to NTR's chamber I went down on my knees and performed a padnamashkar *on the seemingly endless black and white marble squares. He made no attempt to stop me. I waited for five seconds. Whatever chill there might have been in the morning air vanished. NTR beamed.*

In his sixtieth year, NTR was a large man. He was much darker than the image of him I had in my brain, doubtless the result of film stills in which cakes of make-up had done their work. Dressed in his saffron robes, he wore a fat chronometer on his wrist. Throughout, he was extremely self-possessed. Altogether we spoke for 105 minutes over two sessions. He was effusive, and spoke excitedly, especially after I assured him I was not interested in party politics.

NTR is the master of the profound non sequitur. *And that is not his only conversational strength. Politicians rarely enrich language with new words—more often they abase perfectly decent words. But NTR is a poet wrestling with a lexicon. T.S. Eliot is credited with having introduced five words in the English language. In the short time that I spoke to him NTR created two: lucrious (a rich synonym for lucrative)* *and stimulize (a limp version of the verb stimulate). But the superman that he is, NTR wrestles with more than just the lexicon.*

Let's start the interview with your early childhood. Do you have any significant memories?
(*Ponders.*) You know that I was born in 1923 and got educated in Vijaywada up to Intermediate. Then afterwards for my degree course I went to Guntur and joined AC College and I have taken my degree in 1947. I got Intermediate in 1942. And of course in the Public Service Commission I was selected as a sub-registrar in 1947.

These are the bare bones, the official facts. It sounds like a job application. What I want are memories. . . What was your village like? What was your childhood like? What was it like to live in your village then?
I was living as a very common man but with the same status as I have today. I had the luck to gain the appreciation of all my friends. I was in meagre resources and I am, from the beginning, and I like to be very humble and very simple, as simple as possible. And even in my early days when I was studying in my Intermediate I could recollect the day wherein I studied under the streetlight. In my degree course also I don't want to be a burden to my family so I was going daily morning from Vijaywada to Guntur to get my degree course.

At one point you used to travel on a cycle, selling milk to finance your education. Is that what prompted your use of the bicycle as your electoral symbol?
It may have its own effect because as you know thirty to forty miles I was going on my cycle daily. There were lot of hardships. Even after joining the cinema line there was an occasion when I sustained myself without meal for nearly three days for want of just nine *annas* though I was having four pictures on hand. So many friends have shed tears. 'Were we all dead? Why couldn't we have supported you and given you a meal?' But I said: No. I have to take it upon myself. I must know what life is.

You are dressed as a sanyasi now. But what about your childhood? Can you recall any moral lapses? Did you ever lie or steal? Or were you always saintly?
There have been many temptations in my life but I have observed strict discipline. I was tempted once by a short knife and I had taken it. But

again I thought, I should not take it without their permission. So then I put it in the original place.

How old were you at the time?
I was just twelve years old.

Whose house was this in?
Some friends.

I gather you had deep regard for your mother...
I have memories that always haunt me. I used to come from Guntur at night, at about eleven o'clock our train used to come. From a distance I could see my mother waiting for me. In the dead night all were sleeping but only one soul was waiting for me. Even today I carry her ashes in my neck in a locket (*shows it to me*). So whenever I feel much disturbed I take it and put it on my forehead.

How did you acquire your knowledge of mythology and religion?
From the beginning I have been godly minded.

Did you have a particular teacher?
Yes.

Who was your teacher?
From the age of six I used to recite the *Bal Ramayana*. All those books have gone out. Where there was an occasion of any marriage in my village all family members used to make me sit on a mat and used to make me recite.

At college you studied economics. What was it about economics that made you choose the subject?
Because I liked the... I wanted to become an advocate in life, rather the judiciary. And tried also my best to get into the police department. (*Excited.*) Because these were the two departments I liked best. One he can save a man by just standing on the point of justice. Second thing is alone you can save any man with your power, in need you can help any man. I wanted to enter one of the two departments, judiciary or police.

Why didn't you carry these ambitions through? Were there financial problems?
No. That much of economical support was there from my family but it so happened in 1947 I have taken my degree. In 1947 I also stood for Public Service Commission and they selected me a sub-registrar. Because I was having no godfather at that time to give recommendations and so I was rather self-made person. Only alternative was to stand for the Service Commission on my own merits. Luckily I got selection and immediately entered service.

But you wanted to join the Air Force?
That's right. I wanted to join because it is something, adventurous life. I wanted to serve my nation.

Were you particularly attracted to flying?
Yes. I was having the flying hours also.

Have you flown since, later in life? Do you own a private plane?
No. No. No.

After you married your studies suffered a setback. You failed your Intermediate twice...
Yes. There is a saying, *vivaham vidya nashanam*: marriage spoils education. My friends used to say: we are all having hopes on you but after your marriage you could not continue. Routine thing has happened in your life also. So I got wild. All the time I will appear for examination I was doing some business there. I was independent minded person because I am reminded my father is working for me. Friends were tickling me like this. Finally I told: I am going to appear for the examination. So I appeared and got through. Then I told: because you are telling like this I will continue my studies and will take my degree in the first chance.

So it was really in response to a challenge that you went in for higher education?
Yes. And in that time only there came an opportunity while I was studying for my BA, a good opportunity for me to enter this film line. Mr Pulliah, the famous director he wanted me for *Keelu Gurram* and I told: no. My father came (to Vijaywada) only for my studies. Of course I'm not worried if I get a job or not. I am keeping my self-respect I can

live on my three acres of land with my wife and I can earn. But to satisfy the ambition and to satisfy the purpose of my father let me take a degree. Then I refused. Then in '47 I had a screen test in Madras and L.V. Prasad offered me the role of a villain in a film. I refused. I joined service. On the twenty-first day of joining service some other chance came to me for *Palleturi Pilla.*

This was Subha Rao's first film. . .
Yes. It was made in Hindi also. My character Dev Anand acted. Dilip and Dev Anand—*Insaaniyat.* Prasad had recommended my name to Subha Rao. I was saying: no. But in my department there was the first day joke.

What joke?
Generally all the registrars as soon as they go to office they hang their coats over their chair. I don't know why they are doing it, it was surprise to me on first day. So then I was working and a young man came to brief me. First is copying of the documents. What all documents have been registered, there is a register in which they should copy it. When I first worked I was carrying my flask and my tiffin daily from Vijaywada. When the one o'clock was over the peon, the senior peon came and told: come now, *saar*, the one o'clock is over. Lunch break. Come inside. I went in. So they were giving me a sweet, a hot and a *dosa* and a little empty cup was there. They told: this is routine. What routine? Peon says: I am having the portfolio here. Whoever comes and gives me document for copying I take tips from them. I provide refreshments in recess time. Then after, in the evening, they share. District registrar: fifteen per cent, sub-registrar: ten per cent, joint registrar: seven per cent, head clerk: five per cent. And like that. So in the evening I stealthily go and put the share in the pocket of the coat on the chair. In the empty cup I have taken my own tea I have taken from my house.

What was your salary then?
Rupees ninety per month. They told: you may reach even district registrar. Even if you become registrar, if you are as honest as you appear you can't buy all these things. So you must join film line, which is most lucrious (*sic*). An honest man cannot be content with this life.

What price did you charge for your films towards the end of your career?
No that I can't express.

Why not?
No.

You talk of honesty. But every major actor is an exploiter of the poor. Take Amitabh Bachchan for instance. Reports say he charges forty lakhs per film. Now that is tantamount to exploitation of the masses. They need not just food, and shelter but entertainment as well. And they are the ones who have to cough up their hard-earned money for Amitabh's forty lakhs.
No, stars are demanding only in proportion with the huge business that is being done on their films. Amitabh Bachchan or some X or Y is taking so much money because his films have a better market. If some actor even says I am going to act freely, what is the use? His pictures won't have any commercial value.

These days you go about saying, 'Art should serve people not money.' Looking back on your own career in films do you have any regrets? Don't you feel you too exploited the poor of Andhra? Exploited their need for entertainment?
Correct. I became a commercial artist but within those limitations I tried to do my best.

Which do you consider your best role in films?
I leave it to the public.

Which is your personal favourite?
My personal favourite is my Krishna character. I worked on that. My approach, NTR's approach to Krishna's character. I portrayed many Krishna roles but I tried as much as possible to improve from time to time. To think and to go in detail into the soul of Krishna.

One of the most important roles in your career was the one where you played Lord Venkateshwara of Tirupati. That's when a lot of adulation began. . .
Yes. I was concentrating all the time then. Now you can see also. These days of course on account of all the political. . . I used to

concentrate like this. (*NTR falls silent, stares at the opposite end of the room, transfixed.*) Within five minutes I can outfocus any person.

Outfocus?
I can see a blank. I don't see any detail. I don't think of any man also (*still staring*). Opposite I can outfocus you also. I won't see your image. Just you will become a blur. Just outfocussing. You will become a hazy figure. Without any detail. . . Without any ear or eye or anything. . . Now I am slowly getting you also outfocussed.

Where is your concentration?
(*Transfixed.*) I am not seeing Mr Parvatala Rao also. . . Without closing my eyes. I would. . .

. . .blank out?
Yes (*unwinds, stops staring*). This is what I did in the Lord Venkateshwara film. All the artists tried to close their eyes in meditation. You see also sadhus are closing the eyes. Whenever they are doing *tapas* or meditation or concentration they put *padmasana* and sit closing the eyes. I have tried in my life to open the eyes and outfocus anything before me.

To open your eyes and yet not see. . .
Yes, these are all the feats I have experimented.

When you meditate what do you concentrate on?
God.

An abstract God? Or an image in your mind?
It is just a light. That is my approach for meditation. As an artist, my dear sir, concentration is very important. *Kala*. It is so pious and so worthy. Last picture of mine, *Bobbilipuli*, when I was shooting the climax I asked the director to close the doors. It was my fortune also they used to love me so much. Anybody comes they used to sit at a distance from me, they never used to smoke before me. They never came with chappals before me. When the climax we are doing I concentrated for one-and-a-half days. The film consists of nearly 3,000 feet above (*goes into a trance*).

When I used to keep concentrate I would say: ready. They used to shoot. Again I used to concentrate on my next shot, take my mood and say: OK ready please. They used to all pindrop silence.

It is said you can stay awake for stretches of seventy-two hours...
Yes. *Pracharam* at election time, I stayed awake then.

That's unusual enough. But more unusual than that is your ability to sleep. Your friend the actor Gommadi claims that once in Vijaywada you slept for seventy-two hours straight.
Ha, ha, ha. Now if I wanted to sleep I could also sleep on this floor.

For seventy-two hours?
Yes. Sleep means sleep.

But that's not human. It's like a bear in hibernation.
Eating also. I can't stay back from eating. For forty-one days I stayed back from eating after I became chief minister. And if I want to do it I can eat five times a day even.

While shooting Daana Veera Shoona Karna, *a film you made in 1977, I gather you insisted on wearing the three kilogram metal crown for weeks on end...*
Yes. Look (*shows me a bump on his forehead*). I never used to remove till the closure of the call sheet.

Don't you think there could be a metaphorical warning here: if you wear the crown unremittingly you will end up with a bump on the head...
Eh?

It was interesting what you said about your eating habits. A few more questions about your diet. I understand at an early age you gave up rice for maize in order to improve your physique. Is this correct?
I was not very particular of my diet. I am not having a liking for the rice also but now and then I am taking it. First thing I made myself immune to my diet: anything I can eat.

You became a vegetarian on 14 April this year. What prompted the decision?
When I put on this (*points to his* bhagwan bhes) I want to kill down all the emotions and everything.

So you do think that a rajsic *diet produces wicked desires,* dusht vasana?
Yes, because I was having all glamorous life before so I wanted to take out the glamour from my life.

You took sanyas on 14 April . . .
Yes.

What were the precise reasons that prompted you to take sanyas?
I want to be above want. No self want to me. Nothing can tempt me now. And I can't use my power, which God has given, for any of my individual benefit.

After that, there was another confusing report, that you were not a sanyasi but a rajyogi. *Is a* rajyogi *a kind of sanyasi?*
Rajyogi is correct. *Rajyogi* means that he is having his life connected with the mundane world. Like Janaka, Ambarisha, there are certain people who are kings but *rajyogi*. They have dedicated themselves to the people.

So you are not a sanyasi then?
No, not a sanyasi. Sanyasi means I should not sit on the sofa, I should not talk with you. Sanyasi means *complete* renunciation. He should not have any connection with the people, persons, etc.

There has been this story about how some astrologer has recommended that you wear a sari at night. Do you wear saris at night?
I am very very sorry for the human mind. It is a mean thing to say. Treacherous also.Treacherous. Treacherous.

How is it treacherous, this story? After all, even if it were true that you were wearing a sari at night, so what of it? It's not as if they were alleging corruption.
Ha, ha, ha. Our sages they are wearing a sari even, even our Shankaracharya. It is a special style of sari wearing.

So it's hardly a shameful practice. . .
Why night time? If I want to wear it I can wear it in the day time also. I am not a coward. What is there? What is there? It is my taste, my beliefs.

After all you wore a single earring in public despite the jibes in the press that it was a homosexual symbol. . .
Yes. Nobody is empowered to interfere in my private habits.

In press circles much is made of the fact that you have never denied wearing saris.
Nobody asked me so far. They have been writing their own fantastic tales. First time you have asked me and I have denied.

You have gone on record as saying that you 'believe in fate, in God, in astrology' (Sunday) *and saying 'I am religious man and astrology is part of religion'* (Current). *And yet you say you aren't superstitious. How do you account for your belief in astrology?*
As a science, not as a blind belief. How if there is no astrology, astronomy in our studies, how they would have written, much earlier than the English language entered into our country, that the sun is so much distance from the earth, that it is revolving, everything. That on particular days *amavasa*, where a *grihan* takes place? How it is possible?

That could be the work of astronomers. Astrology implies a determinist viewpoint. What exactly do you mean when you say you believe in astrology?
Simply I say. This is the earth. Nine planets moving round the earth. Each planet is having its own effect. Suppose a person is born at a particular point. At that time, which planet is very closer to him, the *wind* coming out of that planet, the first breath the person takes, will determine his whole life.

Which holy person do you feel drawn towards?
Regarding the existing persons, only our Shankaracharya.

You mean Kanchi?
Kanchi. He only is the living sage.

And in mythology? Which rishi's life would you wish to emulate?
The rishis, only Vishwamitra. That is the life.
(*Laughter.*)

I gather there has been some problem with your latest film, the one with the somewhat unwieldy title Srimad Virat Potuluri Veera Brahmendra Swami Jeevita Chaitra.
It is a picture directed, produced by myself. I have even acted five parts in it. I have acted Ramanuja, I have acted Buddha, acted Vyaman and I have acted Veer Brahman. From age to age so many saints have come and served humanity by their preachings.

Why did the Censor Board cut the film? Was there a political problem?
I don't know. Even now it is before the courts.

You created history by being the first person ever to challenge the cuts of the Censor Board by taking them to court, by demanding that they tell you what was offensive. Since then of course the Cinematograph Act 1983 has been passed and it is no longer incumbent upon the Censor Board, if it ever was, to explain the cuts. Have you withdrawn the case from the Madras High Court?
No. They have gone on appeal the Censor Board. Since one-and-a-half years, more than that, we have been fighting. They have imposed four cuts and have asked me to explain. I told: give me the cuts and tell me why they are bad. They must give in writing why so-and-so portion is bad for this reason. They say no.

In a film about a saint what sort of scenes could the Censor Board object to?
I don't know. That's where I got piqued also. It's not at all a commercial film. It's just as a last picture of mine that I have taken with all my dedication to art and to a great saint who has forecasted everything. Brahman has forecasted everything, like astrology.

I gather the saint Brahman wrote the following line yadavamundalu rajamelathasu *and this is a richly ambiguous line: either it means that worthless people will come to rule or else that a husbandless widow will. Which meaning have you preferred in your film?*
(*Smiles.*) It's all right. Let's not go into the details. I think it may affect the living persons.

It's not just your film we're talking about. We're talking about an interpretation of a piece of prophetic literature.
I think it is 450 years back it was written.

So it's a historical document we are discussing. . .
Historical document he has written also, on the palm leaf.

Was there an objection to the enactment of this prophecy?
The dialogue there was objection to was *thera meeda bommale digi vacchi adhikaramunu chelayistharaya*. This is from Swamy Veerabrahman's *Kalagnanam*. It means some images from the screen, that is cinema artistes, will come down and will take the reins and rule the country. And I have put one insertion of Reagan and one of MGR.

Why Reagan?
Because by that time I had not yet entered politics so I took these two people representing. . .of course there were some lady artistes too in foreign countries in politics but I took these two. The Censor Board says: cut. What is this? It is told some screen figures will come and rule the country and before our eyes Mr Reagan has come. How can you deny he is a film artist? Only photos I have taken, not real men also.

Is it true that there is some reference to Sathya Sai Baba in the film?
No. Bal Yogi is. He is predicted by Veerabrahman and he is there.

Is there an objection from the Censor about this scene?
About Bal Yogi, no.

What have you got against Sathya Sai Baba? I ask this because in your film, I say your's because it was directed by you, Kondura Diddina Kapuram *you had the actor Satyanarayana depict a* baba *very like Sathya Sai Baba who turns out to be a fraud. A* baba *with curly hair. . .*
No no no. There are so many *babas* in the country. I have nothing to do with Sathya Sai Baba. I am not having any prejudice with any person.

In general are you suspicious of such babas?
No, no. I have no prejudice. Not against any particular *baba*.

Have you ever met Sathya Sai Baba?
I have seen him once, in Madras. When he came to one of his devotee's house.

What did you speak about?
He said.to me: I know Mr Rama Rao you are a devotee. In one of your pictures you have shown a *baba* and people are saying that Rama Rao is showing an impostor of Sai Baba. But I know, he never thinks of insulting me. He means only, there are so many impostors like me in the world.

Are you a devotee of Sathya Sai Baba?
No (*firmly*). I am not devoted to any man.

(By now it was five in the morning and NTR's confidants had begun to crowd his room. We decided to take a break. I met him next in his office in the afternoon. As I walked in, the cabinet disconvened, NTR was just as energetic as in the morning.)

I recall reading of your rather utopian plans to adopt one million children at the age of four and to bring them up in such a way that they wouldn't have any caste or religion by the end of it.
Yes.

Don't you think these children will end up as rootless beings?
I won't think so, friend. The policy is, I want to announce: donate a child. Each family donates and the chief minister adopts. And I will be, rather, the father of all the children. Then I will take them into my fold and bring them up so that they will have their own faith.

But what will the identity of these children be? We possess an identity beyond that of our names. We have a religious identity, a national identity, even a caste identity. What will these children be?
They will be Andhras.

A state identity?
Yes.

What traditions will they draw sustenance from, the traditions of Andhra?
Yes. Everything will be taught, the moral values, everything.

What do you think of this new trend in the country, of disco dancing, of disco music?
I'm sorry we have lost our traditions. We are insulting our own culture by encouraging all those things. Stimulating only the bestial element in the human.

Have you acted in any disco movies yourself?
Of course, I can't say, not exactly, disco I may not have acted in. But anyhow I can say I have sold my art. I am one of the sinners.

Glad you admit it.
I have taken up the profession. And once I have taken up after all it is the business proposition I must accept it. So I must do something which may not be palatable to me or against my temperament or tastes.

You may recall the recent controversy in Bengal when the Left Front minister Chakraborty refused to allow the disco singer Usha Uthup to sing in government-controlled halls, arguing that her music was an insult to Bengali culture. Your views on disco being what they are would you contemplate similar action?
Once we accept friend that art is commercial there is no means of controlling. When you say art is nationalized the art belongs to our state (*excited*). We are having a different culture, a different tradition. If we want to protect it really, we must nationalize it.

So you would be in favour of nationalizing all art?
Naturally. You must protect the culture and your traditions.

That's a very radical suggestion. Not many people are prepared to go on record as saying that. Could you give me an idea how you would go about nationalizing art?
We shall put down some rules and regulations, where everything must, rather reflect *our* traditions and our art.

And who will determine this? Committees?
We can appoint them. After all the Information Department is there where we stipulate certain rules. The style of Bengal I express my appreciation for. They are keeping their traditions very well. The style of dhoti, the style of shirt and all that I appreciate. Even at sight we can know that he is a Bengali.

Back to the nationalization of art. This would involve things like censorship of books, films, records. . .
Yes. Even we can go to the extent and nationalize the film industry. What is there? Why not? And for your information we are going to start our Telugu university which are having in its wings Sanskrit and Prakrit languages also and other complete academies, academy of performing arts, academy of literature. We want to collect all our ancient manuscripts, something lying in Thanjavur, in Sarasvati Neelayam library when our Telugu kings, Nayaks, ruled in Tanjore. So we are deputing our personnel to bring all those scriptures. What is there written? What secrets are there? What fineries are there? All of them we must bring to the limelight, to the public. We want to do something, rather revolutionary, to stimulize (*sic*) the spirit of ancient tradition and culture.

The day you won the elections you said in an interview: 'I am an admirer (of Mrs Gandhi) since she is a great leader also. Personally I adore her. She is a great leader and I accept her as one.' Why do you adore her? What qualities in her do you find so attractive?
She is the befitting daughter for a noble personality whom we adore. And she is acquitting herself.

Befitting daughter—that's not enough. You bestowed great praise on her. Why?
Let us jump over that question.

Why?
I will answer you later. For you only I will answer, one day.

There seems to be a parallel between your chief ministership in Andhra and Khomeini's rule in Iran. Both of you came in on the wave of popular support. And even today, no matter what the intelligentsia may say, eighty per cent of the people, the masses, have Khomeini firmly in their hearts.
Correct.

Likewise in your case. Would you accept this parallel?
Yes. My strength is the people.

There is another parallel. Khomeini too came in on a populist banner and before he achieved power he too had entered into an informal alliance with the left wingers, the mujahadeen, quite like your support for the Naxalites in the disturbed areas of Karimnagar, Warangal and Adilabad. But after achieving power he wiped them out.
Yes. But first also I have not approved of the Naxalites.

Before we conclude, one last question. Where did you acquire political awareness? From books? Which political theorists do you read?
I go my own policy practically. I don't follow anybody. I'm telling to you very frankly: all my policies are my own.

But you were a student of economics once. Everyone reads books as a student. Who were your favourite political authors?
Political author practically I can say Karl Marx.

Marx! But he was a materialist. How did that fit in with your world view?
Yes, materialism. I am basing myself on that only. I can't depend upon riches. Riches are nothing.

The Illustrated Weekly of India
18 December, 1983

Rajiv Gandhi

On His Years in England, the Emergency and Corruption in India

Given an interview with the Prime Minister, what does one ask him? What approach does one adopt? Does one play the bulldog and ask him questions that should 'embarrass' him, questions about the Congress involvement in the Delhi riots, about the communal slogans in Amethi against Maneka during the parliamentary elections: Beti hai sardaron ki/Desh ke gaddaron ki/Indira ke hatyaron ki. *(She is the daughter of Sikhs, of the country's betrayers, of Indira's killers.) Questions about the arrests of the authors of the CFD Punjab report, about the elevation* *of Tytler to ministerial rank? Or does one play the newshound and ask about Punjab, the forthcoming Assam elections, the Cabinet reshuffle, whether Arun Singh is still number two or whether Arun Nehru has beaten him to it, and why he was so upset by Balraj Chopra's bash at Mehrauli? Or does one play the polite poodle and ask about development work in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, about the forthcoming debate on education, about what the government plans to do about ecology?*

I decided to abandon all three approaches. An interview is not an inquisition. Nor is it an attempt to get aaj ki taaza khabar *(today's latest news), to beat PTI to the newswires. Nor for that matter should it be an occasion to ingratiate oneself with the powerful.*

At an earlier meeting, Rajiv's press aide suggested I speak to him about 'the politics of confrontation'. I thanked him politely.

I wanted to hear Rajiv speak, recollect, reminisce, say anything really except what his IAS advisers have briefed him to say. 'You'll most likely come a cropper,' the aide warned me, 'he's not a man interested in himself. The other day the Doon School Weekly *sent in a list of questions for an interview. "What was your pet name at school?" they asked, "Were you ragged at school?" The Prime Minister put an exclamation mark in the margin.'*

I decided I would take the chance. In the end I settled on three subjects: his relationship with England, the Emergency, and corruption. I imagine readers will think the three disconnected, odd choices perhaps. I see a connection between the three but I will not press it, except to quote a remark Rajiv once made to Ian Jack of the Sunday Times, *Rajiv's credo intact: 'I want to attract a new breed of persons to politics—intelligent, Westernized young men with non-feudal, non-criminal ideas who want to make India prosper rather than merely themselves.'*

I was to fly with the Prime Minister to Bombay on the 28th of last month and speak to him on the plane. Entering the Technical Area at Palam Airport, I was struck by the informality of the whole show. Mani Shankar Aiyer came along in an unstarched pyjama kurta, the senior security men in dark brown safari suits. V. George, the Prime Minister's personal secretary, wore a green and pink striped bushshirt and jeans. The passenger lists the security men had, all three of them, were scribbled in hand.

It was a studied informality: rank was still observed and the distinctions that went along with it. The interior of the IAF Boeing 737 was divided into three sections: a cabin for the Prime Minister in front, a small section with bright, wide, first class seats facing each other for *the aides and top security men, thirty-three ordinary seats, three abreast, for the rest of the security personnel and the crew and director of a documentary that is being made on Rajiv. This way acts of courtesy come easily: all that is required is for discretion to trump distinction. When V.P. Singh had settled into the first class seats meant for the aides, Rajiv sent for him and offered that he share the Prime Minister's cabin; when I walked in uncertain of where I should sit, an aide whispered graciously: 'I think there'll be place for you with us.'*

There was no ostentation on board, vada chutney *and tea were all that was served and though the dish that contained the* vadas *looked as if it were made of silver, given the tone of sobriety I wouldn't be surprised if it were EPNS after all.*

When I entered his cabin for the interview, Rajiv opened his briefcase and pulled out two coloured graphs which he proceeded to exhibit to his press aide. 'Look', he said, 'we're doing well on prices.' I knew it was meant for me but it was a clumsy move and I looked away, began fiddling with my tape recorder, as if it were really not my business.

Rajiv, as anyone who has seen him on television knows, is shy, amiable, affable. He puts you at your ease immediately. It takes some time to get him to warm up and even then he is not the world's greatest raconteur. He keeps his distance but manages at the same time to come across as frank and casual. Occasionally, like when he explained to me why the people might want another Emergency, he put on his serious boy scout look, but mercifully it came off pretty quickly.

Could you tell me when you first came into contact with English culture and the English language. Was it in your grandfather's home, your mother's home?
English language, yes at home.

What was the first language you spoke. Hindi or English?
I don't remember but I think it was Hindi.

When did you start speaking English?
(*Long pause.*) I can't remember (*laughs*). Let me think. . .I think when I was about five or six. I can't remember before that, maybe we started before that.

With whom did you speak to in English, your grandfather, your mother, which particular person?
Well, school. At home we've always spoken Hindi, well Hindustani with spatterings of English thrown in.

There must have been a considerable influence of English culture at home, your grandfather, your mother both had been educated in England. How would you say it manifested itself in your home: books, music, architecture? What sort of subjects were discussed at table?
Books certainly, music certainly.

What sort of music?
Classical, Western classical, some Negro spirituals. I'm now talking of the fifties so that's the very early spirituals. . . Architecture. . . (*thinks*) no.

Was there an interest in English poetry?
No, not in poetry though I know my grandfather read it.

He was very keen on Swinburne I gather. . .
Right.

What sort of books? What were the children's books you read?
Yes, I think we read more children's books, English children's books.

Well, which ones do you remember?
Winnie the Pooh. Then what was that called, the rabbit. . .

Brer Rabbit?
No, *Brer Rabbit* was the comic. No the other one. . . You know the one I mean. They have just made a film. Beatrix Potter. I've forgotten the names of the books.

When did you first go to Britain?
It was 1953 or 1955. I must have been eight or ten.

Did you accompany your mother?
Grandfather really. We both, mother and us.

Was this on a state visit?
Yes.

What are your memories like?
Was it the Coronation in '53? Yes.

Do you remember anything of the Coronation?
No, I remember being left out of everything (*laughs*).

When was it that England first made a considerable impression on you?
I think in 1961 when I went there after school.

Was it your choice to go to Cambridge, or was it your parents?
I think the decision was made together at home.

Did you have a particular desire to go to Cambridge?
No, I think the toss-up was between Germany and England.

Why did you choose England, not Germany?
I don't remember now. The language must have been one factor. I was interested in engineering and that sort of line. That's why they thought of the two.

How did you find Cambridge? Trinity is a large, bewildering college. I know people who've cracked up there in the first term because they don't have enough people to talk to. . . .
Yes, it is difficult to get to know people there, it is so large.

How did you find your way around?
There were a lot of Indians there from school, others that I knew from Delhi, so it helped, not just in Trinity but in Cambridge.

How long were you at Cambridge?
Three years. 1962–65.

What degree did you read for?
Mechanical Science.

May I ask what class you got?
Zero, flunked out.

What do you mean?
I didn't get a degree.

You didn't do it or. . .
No, I did it but I didn't get a degree, I didn't do well enough.

What did you spend most of your time doing? I remember a remark which Tariq Ali picked on and made capital of in his book, I think it was a passing remark in an interview Arun Singh gave to Imprint *'We were the Beatles generation.' Did you listen to the Beatles at all?*
(*Smiles.*) Of course we did. Everybody listened to the Beatles in those days.

Did you perceive around you in the sixties great change in attitudes and were you a part of this change? You know Philip Larkin's verse,

> *Sexual Intercourse began*
> *In Nineteen Sixty Three*
> *(Which was rather late for me)*
> *Between the end of the Chatterly ban*
> *And the Beatles first LP.*

(Rajiv laughs.)

There was a great change in society in England at the time. . .
Yes, there was.

How did it manifest itself to you, were you caught up in it at all?
No, not really, but obviously it does leave an impression.

What sort of impression?
(*Pause.*) Maybe the negative impression would be one of lack of depth and becoming more superficial.

What sort of things lacked depth? The pop stars, Twiggy?
No, just in general, not anything specific.

Was it society at large or Cambridge?
We were very insulated in Cambridge. Of course it is difficult to say how much outside Cambridge. . .

How much of England did you see outside Cambridge? Did you travel a lot?
Well, we did but whatever we did we travelled in a group from Cambridge (*laughs*). So I don't know if it's fair to say how much of the world we saw. I was in Manchester during the vacs and things like that.

Where in Manchester?
Mather and Platt, a pump factory. A pump and electric motors factory.

Was it connected with your course?
With the course, yes, that sort of thing. We worked at Cambridge and got into contact with other people. But basically we were very insulated in a university circle.

What kind of set was this at university: the toffs, the athletes, the intellectual types. . .
A lot of foreign students, a few British students, lots of Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis.

There is something that happens to most Indians who go abroad for University education. Perhaps for the first they become aware of India. At home they just take the country for granted, but abroad they begin to see India in a different way: there is the distance, of course, but also the amount of printed material that is easily available. . .they begin analyzing their own experience of India. Did this happen to you?
Yes, it did happen. But I don't know how much depth I went into because being my grandfather's grandson it did put me in an awkward position *vis à vis* India.

Such as? Were you expected to know certain things, to have certain attitudes?
Well, on the one side, yes, and simultaneously I was considered to be biased, to be pro government. . .

I don't mean politically. . .there are many aspects of India. Some people develop a great interest in Indian music at Oxford. Was there any great interest you developed?
Indian music, no.

No, not music, some—
Jazz, yes.

Who were the musicians you listened to?
Miles Davis a lot, Coltrane. What's his name? . . .Stan Getz—but not the new Stan Getz, the older Stan Getz.

What sort of books did you read in those days? I don't mean University books because those you weren't reading. . . .
(*Laughs.*) Those we weren't. I've forgotten (*pause*). The normal rubbishy books, yes.

You mean airplane books?
Yes. More serious. . .(*Pause.*) I read technical books, in fact I have kept reading technical books, not necessarily technical related to a subject that I am currently doing. . . I mean, for example books on the mind or the brain or things like that which are technical in a different sense to the field I was in. . . .

What sort of books do you mean—books like Gilbert Ryle's Concept of Mind? *Do you mean philosophy of mind?*
No, not philosophy. More harder books, about more technical. . . The way it operates.

Artificial intelligence? It wasn't much of a subject then?
It wasn't much of a subject then. Engineering books but outside the scope of what we were doing at University. . . .

While at University did you come into contact with anyone—in or out of University—someone significant who made an impression on you?
No.

Marie Seton in one of her last pieces of journalism I think wrote last Christmas in the Spectator, *among her memories of you in that period, one summer she said you were helping her proof-read. . . .*
Yes, I did the proof-reading of her book on my grandfather.

She wrote that you said to her that till you had read her book you had not been aware of the role of your family and the Congress party in the Independence struggle. . . .
Yes (*laughs*).

Do you remember anything else of that period? What was it like to be in England then?
It was great fun, certainly (*laughs*).

You moved to Imperial College then. How long did you spend there?
I spent less than a year. I went down, I took up flying, then I came to Delhi. While I was in London I started flying.

About the Emergency, I'd like to recall the remarks you made at your first national press conference on 5 July and later in the Rajya Sabha as the Monsoon Session opened. One thing that struck me about the hullabaloo was it seemed the press had got the wrong end of the stick. . . .
That was what I thought (*laughs*).

I thought it was quite clear but not so clear in the headlines and commentary that when you made your initial remarks they were about the proclamation of the Emergency, not what happened during it. This was the point you reiterated in the Rajya Sabha. . . .
You see there are two quite different things. One is having the powers available, to be used when required. I think the powers must be available because there are situations when some powers are required by a government which it must use and this was recognized by the Janata government which was born out of the Emergency and was very violently against an Emergency. But when they amended the Constitution they left this bit within, they didn't remove it.

Well, I realize you think the proclamation of the Emergency was valid. What was there with the way the Emergency developed that you didn't care for?
A lot of things just went wrong.

What sort of things went wrong?
Basically, I think the government lost control of the administration, of what the state governments, of what the other politicians were doing. What it also did was cut off feedback.

Through censorship of the press?
Well, censorship, maybe a certain amount of fear psychosis.

Don't you think these sort of things might happen in any Emergency?
Only if it goes on for an extended period. If it had finished off in a few months it would have been okay.

Were you at the time in favour of it being lifted early?
Well, I was not very much for the proclamation of the Emergency at the beginning. But there was very definite positive fallout in the infrastructure and other sort of development areas during that period. And if it had been withdrawn earlier. . . .

What date do you think, middle of '76?
(*Pause.*) Six months would have been enough.

What do you think about the Family planning programme?
That went totally out of hand.

That went out of hand later?
But there also I don't know how much it went out of hand and how much it was believed to have gone out of hand. It is very difficult to draw a line. But the fact is that propaganda-wise it very definitely went out of hand.

It was widely thought at the time and we were told this later as well that your brother thought it was a mistake calling the elections in '77. What were your views at the time? Did you think it was the right decision?
Yes, I think it was the right decision to call the elections. I think the elections should have been held on schedule a year earlier. But if you ask me whether the Congress was going to win or lose I knew the Congress was going to lose.

And you told your mother as much?
I told my mother. So did my brother.

What did she think?
I don't know what she thought. I don't think she was sure of winning, I mean, that I know.

I don't know if you've come across a poll commissioned by Imprint *a few months ago. The sample size might have been very small and you know what polls in India are like—or anywhere—*
But ours (opinion polls) are still in the juvenile stage.

This is a remarkable poll which shows that in the big cities sixty-seven per cent of the population sampled approved of the '75–'77 Emergency and that sixty-five per cent would support another one if it were called now. Would you care to comment on such a reaction?
It means that basically people want discipline which is sadly lacking in India today. I don't want to go into the reasons why it is lacking because there are too many reasons. It will take a long time. Discipline is one of the most important things that a country has to have.

Some people feel the timing of the Emergency was unfortunate, that it may have been a good thing to proclaim it had it not been just after the Allahabad High Court Judgement. After all, it is not enough for Caesar's wife to be chaste, she must be seen to be chaste. . . .
I don't know. I have not had access to what sort of intelligence the government was getting at that time. My mother didn't talk to us about it. And of course without that it is difficult to say what really, what sort of pressure they were under. Because there had been just about that time a call by Jayaprakash Narayan for total revolution, including revolt in the armed forces and you know these sort of things.

Something which I think you have said, I can't be sure that you have, that you didn't approve of the way the Maruti company was run. Correct me if I am wrong.
(*Pause.*) No, I didn't disapprove of it. I never went into the details of how the company was being run.

You don't have any reason to believe that there was any impropriety there?
The commissions have gone into it and nothing has come out of it.

Coming to corruption in India, would you care to make some sort of comment on the proliferation of corruption in the country, what you think the causes are?
(*Pause.*) Well, there is a certain shift in the moral standards which one has to accept with fast development, a change in the social set up. So

there are these tensions which do lead to this. But we have not really taken enough steps to correct it.

By 'we' do you mean your government or all governments?
No, I mean all governments. And I have started taking some now but one has to. . . the problem that one really faces is. . .that are you going to be hard enough to upset the apple cart in trying to straighten things up or are you going to play it a little softer.

What are you in favour of, playing it softer?
I am more in favour of playing it a little softer and not upsetting the system but correcting the system.

Take an example, an example which seems a pressing one, especially since one phase of the Punjab problem is over. Kashmir which I imagine today is a big problem for you. . . .
Yes, it is a bigger problem.

I understand the governor has sent you a chargesheet of corruption the Shah ministry has been engaged in, not just corruption but anti-national activities as well. This is the government you chose to back for whatever reason. . . .
We are still backing it.

You are still backing it and yet there is so much corruption that your own governor has reported back about it to you. How do intend to make an example of cleansing public life?
We already have certain systems which are established. Unfortunately, people don't like using them. Also, a lot is said about corruption. For example, Antulay was accused of all sorts of things. The high courts have more or less cleared him, not completely but certainly in certain areas. Now suddenly the people who were accusing him say that the high courts are not reliable. Now who is reliable? You have to rely on somebody to give you an answer. Like Bhajan Lal for example. Now we put a retired judge to look into the charges and he said there was nothing to pursue. Again the newspapers don't want to accept that. Now if they are not going to accept the verdict of judges then we are really in deep trouble. And the fact is that we have got certain institutions, but people are unwilling to use them. In Kerala, for example, I was given a large chargesheet against a minister, I said, why don't you

give it to the *Lokayukta* who's here and who is established? And the *Lokayukta* is a judge but they don't want to do it. Because they have to give it in as an affidavit and then they are held accountable in case it is wrong.

Don't you think, can't you conceive that the judges might be corrupt?
In which case there is no way we can stop it. You have to rely on someone. And so far there has not been a major accusation against the judges or the judicial system of corruption.

Coming back to Kashmir, if your Congress party were not to support the present government—
The whole place would collapse.

Do you think even if there is corruption in the state it is the necessary price for stability?
No, it is not actually. You can't pay a price like that. You have to fight corruption. The question is what method and how roughly do you want to fight it. Do we want to take on Kashmir and Punjab at the same time? How many fronts do we want to open up? And both are border states. And the charges that we have been given are very nebulous. It is not so and so has done X Y and Z. It is so-and-so, he is corrupt, which is not good enough.

I was given to understand a whole list of DOs was sent to you along with the chargesheet. . .
No, there was nothing like that.

The Sunday Observer
13 October, 1985

The Conservative Abroad

Dhiren Bhagat was a great traveller, both within India and abroad. His unfinished book for Penguin India took him to Punjab several times. But England had a special place in his scheme of things. He had, for a while, seriously considered the option of making a home in England but gradually persuaded himself that India was more rewarding for a creative writer. His official designation was that of the South-East Asia correspondent for the London *Observer* but his restless feet took him to every trouble spot of the world. Barely days before his death he had returned from Pakistan, his pockets bulging with election disco music cassettes. The Pakistan story was published posthumously.

Rambling Rambos

I am in the habit of walking around cities at night, talking to whoever will talk to me: pushers, winos, prostitutes, senators. I suppose one day I will get raped and mugged and will finally abandon this practice: till such time I look upon it as an educational exercise, a more stimulating alternative to evening classes. In June I was in Washington, covering Rajiv Gandhi's state visit, and dull though the American capital is by night, whenever I had a free evening I would eat early and commence tramping by eight, returning to my bed some time after two.

One night I ran into Gino and his mate (I never got his name, I'll call him Mack). They were on the edge of the Mall not more than a half-mile from the Lincoln monument. Gino was a thin tallish black, an Eddie Murphy lookalike; Mack was a bearded solider white, quieter but not without a sense of fun. They were both dressed in combat kit—camouflage jackets, khaki trousers—and held lit lanterns. They were both very drunk.

Together they made up the Veterans' Vigil of Honour, which has been going strong since Christmas Eve 1982, the twenty-four hour vigil by the low, sweeping,V-shaped black granite Vietnam Veterans' Memorial which bears on its face the names of the 58,000 American dead, 'our own wailing wall' as a vet once described it. 'We used to be near the wall but they pushed us out,' Mack mutters. 'Pigs, they won't allow us near our wall, won't let us alone. Keep pushing us about, pushed us around about twenty times, I think. Won't let us talk to the press, they just want us forgotten, shoved around out of sight.' Gino was in no mood for this paranoid solemnity. He was busy making desperate whoopee, jumping, laughing. Soon enough he pushed a piece of paper in my hands. 'Sign this, man. Sign this so we can get our friends back.'

It was a petition, addressed (if I remember rightly) to the President of Vietnam, to return the 2,476 Prisoners of War/Missing in Action (POW/MLAs) who, it alleged, were still in Vietnam. It began: 'We, as citizens of the United States. . . .' I tried to point out to Gino it would not be proper for me to sign this as I was a foreigner. 'It don't matter, man. I signed it an' I'm Mexican.' He then leapt a bit more, as if the prancing proved he was a Mexican, and spoke with what he took to be a Latin accent. 'Was this man ever in Vietnam?' I asked Mack. 'Yeah,' said Mack with a wink that could have meant anything. 'He was in Nam. We were all in Nam. We're still in Nam.'

By now Mack had pulled himself together somewhat, stopped waving his lantern and begun to explain to me why he thought some of his mates were still in Vietnam, sweating in the jungle, incarcerated in bamboo cages. At one point he began gently crying. I could not help thinking this vigil, this pathetic drunken hiccup, was somehow a truer epitaph to that crazy war than all the elegantly turned out ten-years-after pieces we read in April.

Gino and Mack may get drunk about it and stay up all night on the Mall making whoopee but the POW/MLAs issue is one that exercises many more people. Some fifteen organizations (some pro-war, some not) are trying to get the '2,476' men back. (There are various numbers bandied about: 2,464 in the *Washington Post*, over 2,400 in Congressman Applegate's *House Joint Resolution*, 2,490 in the department of defence *Fact Book* published in January 1984, 2,477 in the *New Republic*.) Last year President Reagan signed a declaration making the third Friday in June the annual National POW/MLA Recognition Day. This year he declared the recovery of the men to be 'the highest national priority'.

And it's not just Reagan and the veterans. This summer as the Shi'ites kicked and pushed the grunting Uncle Sam, Sylvester Stallone's latest film *Rambo*: *First Blood II* raced to the top of the all-time charts, grossing $108 million in the first forty days in 2,165 cinema-halls, becoming thereby 'the most popular adults-only US film ever screened'. As you will have heard by now, it's all about a hulk of a man, 'a pumped-up cartoon palooka', as a reviewer recently described him, a half-German, half-Red Indian, American super-patriot who is sent out to Vietnam to check if there are any American prisoners of war still there. It's all part of a nasty Pentagon game, or so Stallone will have us believe. If Rambo doesn't find anything, there's nothing to rescue; if he does, they'll ditch him. He finds the POWs. They ditch him.

All recent wars are rolled into one: the Cold War (the Russkies are helping the Viets), the Second World War (the Viets dress like the Nips in the movies of the last war) and, of course, the war America lost ten years ago. The tragedy of Rambo, we are to believe, is that America no longer loves him as he loves America. Using the only long word in his repertoire he says he is 'expendable' and then for the benefit of the guys in the audience whose verbal aptitude scores aren't too hot he explains what that means: 'Like someone invited to a party, they don't show up, doesn't make a difference.' Sob sob.

But the nasty bureaucrat from the Pentagon doesn't have a chance, however sensible his views:

> 'What do you want to do, Sarge? . . . You want the war all over again? . . . . Show POWs on the six o'clock news? . . . You want to bomb Hanoi? Want everyone screaming for armed invasion? You think somebody's going to get up on the floor of the US Senate and ask for $50 billion for another . . . for a couple of forgotten. . . . Goddamit, I'm going to forget this conversation ever took place.'
> 'Bastard.'
> 'And if I were you I would never make the mistake of bringing up this subject again.'
> 'It's you who's making the mistake.'
> 'Yeah, what mistake?'
> 'Rambo.'

Sure enough Rambo gets him in the end but only after our hero has flown out dozens of POWs to freedom and single-handedly wiped out half the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. 'Rambo,' Stallone proudly announced to an interviewer, 'is a machine our society has created to destroy other societies.'

Audiences all over America have spent the summer cheering this machine on. ('It seems to have perfectly articulated the nation's mood over Vietnam,' chortled *Time*.) And before the surgeons got Reagan in the gut even the veteran star of *This is the Army* was flexing his muscles appreciatively. Just before he addressed the American nation after the hijack trauma, Reagan muttered into a microphone which just happened to be switched on: 'After seeing *Rambo* last night I know what to do the next time this happens.' (Not to be outdone by Reagan, even the Solidarity-bashing Czech here has joined the bandwagon. 'Is your man our Rambo?' the *Daily Mirror* asked its readers recently, offering a holiday in Acapulco to the Brit lookalike. 'The *Mirror* is out to find Britain's RAMBO MAN, a Mr Macho who can flex his pex better than the rest. . . .WALLIES, WIMPS and WEAKLINGS do not apply. Only REAL men read the *Mirror*.')

Rambo may be the most popular of the POW movies but it's only a sequel. And even Stallone's original *First Blood* was merely one of several films on the theme: there have been Chuck Norris, the karate man's *Missing in Action* and *Missing in Action II*, Gene Hackman's *Uncommon Valor* and several episodes of TV series like *Magnum PI* and *Airwolf* besides.

The POW/MLA issue has been variously handled by successive presidents. In 1966 Johnson conducted secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris over their release. Publicity would only harm the talks, so the administration played down the issue. Nixon in 1969 went public with the issue, trying to use public opinion to pressurize the Vietcong into following the Geneva Convention. POW/MLA families were now encouraged to demonstrate. Spiro Agnew wrote out a $10,000 cheque to the National League of Families of Americans Missing in South-East Asia, from the proceeds of the sale of Agnew wristwatches and T-shirts. But by 1970 the affected families began to doubt Nixon's goodwill. Carter appointed a commission to look into the question, which reported (after a somewhat farcical trip to Vietnam: they weren't allowed to travel outside Hanoi) that there were no American POWs in Vietnam. In 1978 the Pentagon announced that all MLAs were 'presumed dead' except for one POW, Charles Shelton, who was kept on for 'symbolic purposes'.

The point about Reagan's declaration of the issue being the 'highest national priority' is that he has no new evidence that there are any men out in the jungle. The week I met Gino and Mack, the *New Republic* ran a story on the subject with a sweating Rambo on the cover. 'Sorry, Rambo,' read the caption, 'there are no POWs in Vietnam.'

> . . .of the 2,477 men categorised as MLA, nearly half (1,186) are known to have been killed in action, but their bodies were not recovered. Of those, 436 were Air Force pilots shot down over the sea, whom the Pentagon lists as 'non-recoverable'. In 647 other cases a presumptive finding of death was made at the time of disappearance. Thus 1,833 of the 2,477 MLAs are known or presumed to be dead. That leaves 644 men who theoretically could still be alive and in Vietnam.

The writer of the piece went on to record that 'of the 3,508 reports from Indochinese refugees about alleged sightings of missing Americans since 1975, the Defence Intelligence Agency discounts all but five.' True, these figures suggest there *might* have been some POW/MLAs who were left behind but the *New Republic* (and many others besides) believe that the Vietnamese must have killed them by now. Why would they have kept them alive?

When Mack ran out of facts he suggested I go to Arlington to meet Terry, who ran the vigil. A few days later I crossed the Potomac and found the rundown shack they were housed in. The place resembled a junkyard. In the porch lay rusting dumb-bells, a sofa with its springs ripped out, empty gasoline tins. The trash can contained at least a thousand flattened beer cans, gold, pink, silver, blue.

I saw Gino lope into the loo, there was a Red Indian watching television in the shabby lounge, a girl who poured me some lemonade and Kevin and Alan, whom I spoke to. On the walls I saw posters of Jesus Christ, the Pope, an eagle in chains, AMERICA REMEMBERS YOU, and paintings of bombers in sleek blue skies. By the dining table were maps of Washington DC, Virginia, Vietnam and a dartboard. On the notice board I spotted the 'Barrack Laws':

> 5. Absolutely no drugs, guns or knives (except pocket types) will be allowed in the barracks or duty areas.
> 6. No bringing of whores for lewd or lascivious activities.

Kevin laughed. 'It's all a joke, man, like the army.' I agreed; the atmosphere was lax enough to make the very idea of a set of rules seem outrageously funny.

Terry wasn't there, but Kevin and Alan talked to me. What did they think of *Rambo*? 'There are two reasons why I like the film,' said Alan in a precise, measured tone I had not expected. 'It shows there are POWs and MIAs in Vietnam and, two, it shows the government has turned its back on them. Otherwise it's typically Hollywood and a piece of nonsense. It caters to the sensationalist attitude in the country.'

Why do they believe there are Americans still languishing in Vietnam? Isn't it a myth they are helping sustain? Kevin had three reasons, reasons I have heard elsewhere but all the same worth recording. 'One, Nixon promised the Vietnamese $6 billion for reparation during the 1973 Paris peace accord but Congress wouldn't let him pay. Two, there is $40 billion worth of equipment that we left behind; they need someone to teach them how to use it. And three, they have something that we want. It's that simple.'

I'm not sure it is that simple. Kevin's figures can be contested but his reasons do make it difficult for one to swallow entire the *New Republic* line. It was Mack that night on the Mall who gave the most intriguing reason of all, the one that reeks most of myth and American impotence. 'Every time they're training terrorists, the Lebanese, the Libyans, the Nicaraguans, they take the boys they're training to the bamboo cages and show them our men, it's living evidence. *Here, here we've got proof that the Americans can be beaten, that the greatest nation on earth can be humbled by anyone. We did it, and so can you.*'

The Spectator
10 August, 1985

Fidei Defensor?

When the Queen last came here, exactly twenty-five years ago, Nepal was just joining the modern world. In 1950 it had emerged from the almost total isolation the Ranas—the local Shogunate—had imposed on it. In 1951 Nepal got its first daily newspaper, in 1956 its first motorable road, and in 1959 its first university.

The Queen's visit in 1961 accelerated the modernization in touching ways. In preparation for the great event documentary films of the coronation were viewed by the Nepalese authorities. Inspired by the aluminium decorative arches that had spanned the streets of London on the occasion, the authorities proceeded to cut down an avenue of ancient jacaranda trees and in their place erected unshapely bamboo arches. From the centre of each arch hung flowers and three balloons, two spherical and one elongated. By the time the Queen drove into the city much of the air had escaped from these balloons and they hung limp before her.

Throughout Kathmandu lightless traffic lights with pagoda roofs went up, their red, green and amber eyes simply painted on. Pagoda-roofed letter boxes that were hardly designed to take letters sprouted on street corners and the road from the airport was carpeted with vermilion. It wasn't all innocent colour, of course. Only months before,the Prime Minister had been imprisoned, his party—which enjoyed a majority—dismissed from office and parliament dissolved. The monarch had declared a state of emergency and when the Queen arrived, thousands of security men were prowling the streets, anxious lest the underground

Nepali Congress make its presence felt. But even so it was the unsc phisticated charm of Nepal that made the greatest impression. I quot from the late Desmond Doig's as yet unpublished book, *My Kind C Katmandu*—his account of the state banquet at Singha Durbar:

> The Queen of England, who had disappointed the expectan Nepalese earlier by wearing the simplest dresses and a strand o two of pearls, came shimmering in the famous emerald tiara emerald necklace, emerald drop earrings and diamonds everywhen even embroidered into her Hartnell gown.
>
> But then this is Nepal and between the crystal reception and th crystal banqueting hall is a hall of distorting mirrors so that th Queen and Prince Phillip were now dwarfs, now possessed of giraffe necks, now spreading like atomic clouds, now disappearin altogether.

Twenty-five years on, no such mutations occurred. The Singha Durbar was substantially burnt in 1973 and though the hall of distorting mirrors was not ravaged by the fire, the state banquet this time was held at the Narayanhity royal palace, a modern grey and pink monstrosity which the correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* described as an 'Oriental power station' and which the travelled Nepalese have nicknamed 'Paddington'.

Nepal has changed. As the government-owned newspaper the *Rising Nepal* recently predicted in its eccentric English: 'The royal couple will find a sea change in the Nepal advanced and developed of today from the Nepal of 1961.' You bet. There was no vermilion on the roads, and no balloons, limp or otherwise. Instead, smart Nepalese and British flags lined the newly cleaned roads. As the Queen drove down the Arniko Highway (built by the Chinese in the late sixties) in a sleek black six-door Mercedes 600 (it was an Austin Princess the last time), she passed the newly built Everest Sheraton Hotel whose guests had been warned not to look out of their windows as the royal motorcade passed lest they be mowed down by snipers.

In the twenty-five years since the Queen's last visit the population of Nepal has increased from 9.41 million to 16.62 million, the number of doctors in the country has risen from 128 to 630 and there has been a twenty-fold increase in the number of telephone lines (from 1,120 to 22,580). Of course those have not been the only changes. The government handouts did not supply us with the figures for the increase in drug addiction, nor for that matter did they inform us as to the increase in the number of Christians in Nepal. But my information has it that the latter has shot up from zero in 1950 to about 800 in 1970 and 'anywhere between twenty and thirty thousand' today. With this increase has come another, less welcome, increase: till 1961 no Christian had been prosecuted in a court of law for practising the faith: since then twenty-five have been convicted with sentences ranging from six months to six years and another eighty-five are currently facing charges of either converting others or having been converted.

Nepal is the only Hindu kingdom in the world but theoretically that should not get in the way of tolerance. In fact, as theocracies go, it is possibly the most tolerant. Missionary schools, Sikh *gurudwaras*, Muslim *madrasas* and Jain *mandirs* can be found without much difficulty. Last Sunday I attended a mass in the ballroom of my hotel, the Oberoi Soaltee, in which the Irish Chaplain warned us against 'the glamour of evil'. That evening I was joined at my blackjack table in the hotel's casino by a group of uniformed Rajneeshites. (Rajneesh was staying in the hotel, delivering sermons on the subject of AIDS in the very ballroom.) Whenever one raises the subject of tolerance with the authorities the example of Ranadhir Subha, the foreign minister, is trotted out. We are told he is a Christian having converted in Kalimpong in India before he came to Nepal. It is not a very convincing instance: Subha does not belong to any of the three hundred interdenominational congregations in Nepal, indeed he has never identified himself as a Christian publicly and as a Nepalese minister remarked to me there is no such thing as a closet Christian.

Freedom of religion is a tricky affair. Article 14 of the Constitution allows every person to 'profess his own religion as handed down from ancient times' provided that no one 'shall be entitled to convert another person'. Contrary to what the Nepalese ambassador in London maintained in his letter to the *Times* on 3 September last year, the Constitution does not state that an adult may change his faith of his own free will. In fact the Chapter on Disciplinary Matters of the Civil Code, the *Mulkhi Ain*, states just the opposite, prescribing a maximum sentence of one year for any Hindu who converts. (The sentence for attempting to convert another is three years, if the conversion is effected it is six years.)

Last month a delegation of US and British officials arrived, which included two British MPs, David Atkinson (Con., Bournemouth) and David Alton (Lib., Liverpool). After travelling about a thousand miles across Nepal and interviewing dozens of Christians who have been persecuted it concluded that it 'had found evidence of religious rights violations'. There was evidence of arbitrary harassment of accused Christians during the judicial process, confiscation of Bibles and on the question of religious tolerance, Nepalese law, they found, did not conform to the United Nations declaration on human rights to which Nepal is a signatory.

'It's the legal persecution we want relief from,' Charles Mendies, a Nepalese Christian minister said to me, 'there will always be persecution from the family and the community and I would not want that to go: look at the West, they don't pay a price for being Christian so they take Christ for granted. The Queen is a typical example, she doesn't care for what the persecuted Christian in Nepal is facing.' Without sharing Mendies's faith, I can understand his feelings: while the Queen has found time to congratulate King Birendra on his tinpot democracy and the Duke to visit Tiger Tops, neither has the time to visit even one Christian organization in their five days here.

In 1960 Sir Edmund Hillary set off on an Himalayan expedition to find the yeti. He did not find the mythical beast, so instead he decided to show the world a yeti scalp that was kept as a relic in a monastery in the Nepalese village of Khumgung. The villagers agreed to this on the condition that one of their elders, Kumjo Chumbi, accompany Hillary on his travels as a custodian of the scalp. Tokyo, Zurich, Oslo, Washington—the team travelled through the influential world, exhibiting the scalp. When they called at Buckingham Palace the Queen was out, so Kumjo Chumbi left her some presents before they came away.

Early in 1961, a few months after he had returned to his village 3,900 metres above sea level, Kumjo Chumbi was invited to Kathmandu to meet the visiting Queen. Together with his villagers, his pregnant wife and the yeti scalp he set off for the capital. After fifteen days of marching Mrs Chumbi felt unwell. Taking a longer than usual lunch break she gave birth to a baby boy, then resumed the trek after lunch. As a result the party reached Kathmandu a bit late. The Queen was at the airport, all set to leave. But the scalp was duly displayed to her, gifts presented and the baby shown. The Duke of Edinburgh tried to make himself useful. On learning that the boy had not yet been named the Prince suggested he be called Philip and offered to become his godfather.

In 1961 Kumjo Chumbi owned a few yak and lived in a stone house in the mountains. Today his son Philip lives in a two-storey concrete bungalow only a stone's throw from the King's hideous palace and is a director of a medium-sized trekking company. Philip, like his country, has come a long way. His people, of course, don't call him Philip. When I called on him this week, it took a bewildering fifteen minutes in his compound to work out that Thukten Sherpa was the man I was looking for.

Thukten Philip Sherpa has never heard from his godfather. A few days ago he decided to get in touch, to see if it was possible to meet Prince Philip during this visit. As I write this it is still not clear that he will get his appointment. But whether or not the Duke has forgotten his godson, it is plain that the Queen has forgotten her Christians, and her duty to them.

The Spectator
22 February, 1986

India Busts Sanctions

In all the excited columns that got written about the stormy sessions at the Marlborough House mini-summit, Mr Rajiv Gandhi's most daring suggestion disappeared without trace. The Indian Prime Minister had suggested that the Commonwealth secretariat set up a unit that would monitor and publicize sanctions-busting by Commonwealth countries. Apparently Mrs Thatcher thought the unit would somehow affect the sovereignty of the member states; the British press chose not to report it. 'It's not worth the paper it's written on,' the TV-a.m. political correspondent contemptuously dismissed the suggestion when I brought it up in conversation. I deferred, as one always does, to TV-a.m.'s political sagacity.

Now I'm not so sure. It was an interesting suggestion. 'If India is busting sanctions,' Mr Gandhi is supposed to have said, 'let India be exposed.' Well, India has been busting sanctions—and she has been exposed. The problem is that whenever she is exposed the government, instead of congratulating the journalist, goes mum and gets quite upset.

On Saturday, 2 August, at about the time Mr Gandhi was boarding the Air India jet that would transport him to the summit, Channel 4 showed a documentary which should have warmed Mr Gandhi's heart, *South Africa: Shutting the Door*, a thirty-minute film made by Tim Cooper and Ali Porteous, explained how Indian businessmen have routinely bust sanctions against South Africa ever since they were imposed in 1954.

The film opened with shots of a Durban warehouse. As the camera closed in on the stacks of gunnybags bulging with grain and spices we saw imprinted upon them the bold legend 'Produce of India'. Black workers busied themselves in the background. The voice-over explained that they were quite candid about the goods from India but, understandably, feared being identified on television.

The foodstuff comes mostly from Bombay or Cochin though it is routed in several different ways: Singapore, Colombo, Seychelles or Mauritius. A lot of it is just sent to Maputo in Mozambique marked, 'Maputo (D)'. It's not difficult to work out that the 'D' stands for Durban where the consignments are diverted to, even before they reach Maputo.

In India none of this is news. Bombay traders speak freely of this trade. Last December *India Today*, the subcontinental *Time* clone, featured a four-page investiagation upon which the Channel 4 film is largely based. The magazine—and the documentary-makers—spoke to Anand Kala, deputy director of the directorate of revenue intelligence who was involved in busting one such scam last year. In July the Government of India ordered the MV Atair, a Colombo-bound Singapore-registered vessel to return to Cochin port after intelligence reports suggested that it was carrying cargo meant for South Africa. Eight businessmen were arrested in consequence; though they admitted to busting sanctions while being interrogated they are all out of jail by now and claim the confessions were obtained under duress. Kala is convinced they were guilty but, as Tim Cooper pointed out, not one of them has been brought to trial as yet.

At least the government tried with the traders. With the diamond business it is altogether a different story. India produces very few diamonds—some 20,000 carats a year out of a total world production of sixty-six million carats—but she has one of the largest cutting industries in the world. (In terms of value of diamonds cut, the Indian cutting centre comes third after Antwerp and Tel Aviv; measured in terms of caratage India cuts the lion's share.) Nearly half-a-million artisans are employed in this industry which, though ancient in origin, has only recently come into its own, thanks to the 'democratization' of diamonds, the new, advertising-induced, vogue for small, cheap stones.

The stone may be small but the business is big. The imports of rough diamonds cost Rs 900 million; the processed diamonds sell for roughly Rs 11,500 million. As such it is the largest single commodity in the Indian export portfolio. No one—not even the most sanctimonious, apartheid-hating Prime Minister—can afford to stop this trade. Yet stop it he must if Mr Gandhi wishes to be taken seriously when he asks other countries to impose comprehensive trade sanctions against South Africa, for the stones the Indians cut come from a South African-owned cartel, the Central Selling Organization. And it's not just that we buy from the South Africans. The Janata government created the Hindustan Diamond Company Limited (HDCL) which is the largest importer of rough diamonds into India. The Government of India owns fifty per cent of its equity; the other half is something of a mystery. Officially, thirty per cent is held by an Indian company called the Indian Investment Trust, the rest by the Bank of Bermuda. Market sources have long suspected that these companies are covers for De Beers; indeed, *India Today* in its investigative article (15 December, 1985) went so far as to state that the Bank of Bermuda is owned by the Diamond Trading Company, a De Beers subsidiary.

When Tim Cooper asked Mr K.R. Narayanan, India's minister of state for external affairs, how it was that Indian companies were hand in glove with South African countries, Mr Narayanan disingenuously said it was a London-based cartel that they dealt with. But Cooper persevered and the minister seemed to give ground ('I don't know if this is listed as a South African Company'). Just when the matter got particularly sticky, Cooper found his lights went out. Farrukh Dhondy, the Channel 4 editor who commissioned the film, told me that Mr G. Parthasarthy, the external affairs spokesman, just pulled out the lights plug in the middle of the interview. Tim Cooper, whom I contacted at his home in Leamington Spa, was gentler. 'Let's just say the lights went out mysteriously. There was no way Mr Narayanan could evade the question. I think the lights going out just gave him time to marshal his thoughts.' (Of course, the press secretary at the Indian High Commission denies the story.)

Whether or not the external affairs spokesman pulled out the lights plug it is clear that India buys diamonds from the CSO, that the CSO is controlled—Louis Nchindo, the resident director of De Beers, Botswana, admits it is 'owned'—by De Beers, and that the Indian government is hugely embarrassed by all this. When I rang up the Indian High Commission to see what they had to say, all they could come up with was a fidgety 'No comment'.

And yet Mr Gandhi is keen on sanctions. Two weeks ago on the BBC, Mark Tully asked him where they had worked in the past and he came up with the plainest poppycock: 'Wherever they have been used unanimously and effectively, they have worked. Southern Rhodesia at that time. In spite of the tremendous leakages through South Africa they did bring about freedom for Zimbabwe.' I find it difficult to accept that my Prime Minister *believes* any of this.

Later Mark Tully asked, didn't sanctions always lead to leakages? 'I suppose it is very difficult to guarantee a hundred per cent watertight system . . . we have to accept *some* leakages. Even if there is ten per cent or fifteen per cent that's good enough. . ... It's a question of sending a message.And saying, look that is what we mean, that is what we feel.'

This is the politics of gesture and we Indians are adept at it. It is the old Brahmanical game of manner over matter, form over substance. 'It's a question of sending a message. . . .' Of course once the message is delivered, it's back to business as usual. The Sikh demonstrators from Walsall who stood in the rain outside Marlborough House during the summit handed out a leaflet with a menacing picture of the Indian PM in dark glasses. The caption read 'Would you trust this man to make statements against apartheid?' I certainly wouldn't trust him to make statements about sanctions.

The Spectator
16 August, 1986

African Bark Without Bite

Last week I called on the general manager of Barclays Bank of Zambia Ltd, at their head office in Lusaka. After keeping me waiting for nearly an hour the urbane Mr Francis Xavier Nkhoma sent for me and apologized. He lit a cigar and smiled. 'When I saw your calling card I thought Bhagat was some old English name. So I told my secretary, "While he is waiting outside serve Mr Bhagat a cup of tea and then throw a stone at him." She was shocked. She said, "Sir, I cannot throw stones at visitors, it is not done." I said, "No, that's perfectly OK. Mr Bhagat is English. These days when you throw stones at the English you are merely defending your national rights." '

I have just come from Harare where thanks to the Non-Aligned Summit, throwing stones at the West is no longer a weird hobby but has become the fastest-growing industry in recent times. Shooting about in cars imported from South Africa, lounging around in villas designed in South Africa and sipping South African wine, a fortnight ago leaders from ninety countries took a casual bash at 'the major trading partners of the racist regime', and, with equal ease, advocated sanctions.

That these resolutions—dripping with easy piety—should have been passed in Harare is a capital joke. Ever since the Rhodesians got their UDI act together Harare has been the world's centre for sanctions-busting expertise and even though Johannesburg is now rapidly taking over there are enough experienced businessmen in the Zimbabwean capital who could have instructed the visiting heads of state on how sixty countries cooperated between 1965 and 1980 to make a joke of the phrase 'comprehensive mandatory sanctions'. In fact there was no need to meet the experts. To learn about the efficacy of sanctions all that the NAM delegates had to do was to keep their eyes open and count the number of Renaults, Peugeots, Toyotas and Mercedes on the streets that looked between six and twenty-one years old.

All this would explain why sanctions won't work; to understand why sanctions won't be applied, at any rate by the front-line states, the visitors would have had to look deeper. Of the eight real front-line states (Tanzania is not a front-line state), five have made it clear they will not be imposing sanctions: Malawi, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana and Mozambique. The other three, Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe, say they will. Angolan sanctions don't mean very much: outside the Yugoslav-run duty-free shops there is hardly anything you can buy in that country, and the black market the Zaireans run in Luanda is so vicious that an egg ends up costing you five US dollars. Zambia and Zimbabwe have certainly been making noises, but how serious are they?

To understand what is happening in Zimbabwe over sanctions one has to grasp the complicated game Mugabe was been playing with Pretoria ever since he assumed power in 1980. Early on there was an arrangement whereby Zimbabwe could send its exports through South

Africa; in return Zimbabwe promised not to house any ANC bases. Then there was the preferential tariff agreement which allowed Zimbabwean goods to sell in South Africa at a tariff of between ten and fifteen per cent. Initially this was a concession the South Africans made for the beleaguered Smith government; after independence, however, it was renewed by Mugabe and has been renewed twice again: in 1983 and, most recently, on 31 July this year, three days before the Commonwealth summit at Marlborough House. All these deals are struck by officials either in Pretoria or in Harare. The details are not published in the newspapers in Zimbabwe and even businessmen are often kept guessing. This is the 'secret' side of the game.

Publicly, of course, the government abuses South Africa and is allowed to do so by the canny South Africans. Sometimes Pretoria gets annoyed or, more to the point, appears as if it is annoyed with the rhetoric and cracks a whip. This happened in July 1983 when the preferential tariff agreement had to be renewed. Initially Pretoria refused to sign the deal. Intermediaries—black and white Zimbabweans—scurried south only to be told that the deal would not go through unless two black ministers visited Pretoria. This was impossible so the Zimbabweans begged and scraped till finally Pretoria agreed to send a team of officials to Harare.

There are some who feel this delicate game of abusing above, licking the arse below, ended on 19 May this year when the South Africans bombed the ANC offices in Harare. It was as if South Africa had broken the rules; after that the Zimbabweans could no longer be certain of the South African response. Accordingly they see the rhetoric getting more and more emotional after that date: on Soweto day, 16 July, Robert Mugabe spoke publicly of 'killing the Boer'. In the first week of August, without consulting his cabinet, he announced at Marlborough House that he would go along with Commonwealth sanctions. On 8 August on his return from London he gave a press conference where he reaffirmed his stand on sanctions, passionately declaring that his people would live on 'one mealie meal a day' if necessary. On 29 August, at his press conference on the eve of the NAM summit Mugabe committed Zimbabwe to sanctions which NAM would agree to cover over and above the Commonwealth package. At this same press conference he tried to pretend that the 31 July preferential tariff agreement was merely a 'routine matter' which had been signed by officials ('I was not aware it had been signed') and said it would be overridden by the London decision to impose Commonwealth sanctions. He fooled nobody. That renewal was not a routine matter and Commonwealth sanctions are not going to be imposed in a hurry. Indeed the game now is to pitch higher and higher, to ask for universal mandatory sanctions, so that you are not obliged to impose any sanctions at all 'till everyone agrees'.

There are other reasons to believe that the sanctions rhetoric is just a distraction. True, Mugabe is an idealist and would dearly like to be seen as the man who led the West into the struggle against South Africa. But he is also a very pragmatic man who has behaved circumspectly so as not to damage Zimbabwe's economy. And as P.K. Botha told a black Zimbabwean intermediary recently, 'We are very pleased with Robert. We want him to be held in high esteem throughout the world. It is better that we should trade with tough "radicals" than with puppets like Banda.' On 6 August, when the South Africans cracked the whip again by closing the border at Beit Bridge and trucks began to pile up, the contingency planning committee of the Zibabwean government, headed by the finance minister, Mr Chidzero, met for the first time and asked for the most basic date, i.e. the effects of sanctions on jobs, trade etc. To date, the ministry of trade and commerce in Harare has not decided which exports would be given priority should South Africa put on a genuine transport squeeze. It is easy to argue that this unpreparedness is typical of Third World incompetence; easy but wrong. It is further evidence that Zimbabwe is not going to rush into anything as foolhardy as sanctions.

Foreign journalists and other Western 'observers' in Harare do not see sanctions as an issue where opinion is divided on tribal lines. During the NAM circus I busied myself winning the confidence of a couple of Zimbabwean intermediaries who shuttle between Harare and Pretoria. From those businessmen I learnt a quite different story. It is well-known that politics in Zimbabwe is divided on tribal lines, in particular that Mugabe runs his Zanu (PF) government by cleverly balancing the interests of the three main Shona tribes: Karanga (twenty-five per cent of the population), Zezuru (twenty-one per cent) and Manyika (eleven per cent). Prominent Karangas include Simon Muzenda, the deputy prime minister, the minister of security, the minister of justice, the army chief of staff and the air force commander. Everybody concedes the Karangas 'made' Mugabe: what is less well-known is their extreme pragmatism and the links several top Karangas have with South Africa.

The pragmatism of the Karangas over sanctions is heartening. For however desirable it may be to bring down the racist régime south of the Limpopo, this is not a realistic prospect for the front-line states.

After hearing Mugabe's Soweto day speech about 'killing the Boer', Samora Machel remarked, 'If Mugabe goes on like this, in ten years' time Harare will end up looking like Luanda or Maputo.'

In 1965 Zambia excused itself from the obligation of imposing sanctions on Rhodesia on the quite reasonable ground that sanctions would destroy its economy. In 1973, however, Ian Smith closed the border for a few weeks. When Smith decided to reopen the border Kaunda would not play ball. The international community promised to help out Zambia financially. Most of these promises were never kept and Zambia suffered tremendously. In 1978 Kaunda was forced to reopen the border.

With this experience behind him, Kaunda is naturally more cautious. Though he enjoyed himself lashing out at Sir Geoffrey Howe in Lusaka, and later at his press conference at the Churchill hotel in London in the first week of August, K.K. has already begun to backtrack on sanctions. At the SADCC meeting at Luanda he refused to answer newsmen's questions on airlinks. In Harare he went so far as to say that without the 'major trading partners of the racist régime' joining in it would be both 'meaningless' and 'suicidal' for Zimbabwe and Zambia to impose sanctions. Then he went on to suggest that the US hold talks with the front-line states, a brilliant delaying tactic. As we learnt last Saturday—and as we knew all along—Reagan will have none of that.

Though the Zambians survived the seventies without trade with South Africa, it will not be so easy today. Quite apart from the food in Lusaka stores, most of Zambia's fertilizers and mining machinery come from South Africa. Sanctions will inevitably push up costs.

A day before I left India for Africa I found myself on a plane to Delhi sitting next to a new MP, an old friend of Rajiv's. The talk came round to sanctions. 'There's a fire burning at home,' he muttered in Hindi. 'All we do is to go abroad and yell.' At first I was impressed by his forthright stance. I had expected him to be full of idealistic guff. Thinking back on it, I realize that in his honesty he was naïve. Rajiv knows better. Politics is all about making a noise when you can. When you get tired of rioters throwing stones at home, it is a good idea to go abroad and throw some stones yourself.

The Spectator
27 September, 1986

Race to the Top

> *We do not have to be at the barricades to be revolutionaries; we do not have to be grassrootists to be radical. To apprehend the social consequences of what we ourselves are doing and set out to change it—merely to be traitors to our class—is in itself a revolutionary act.*
>
> — Institute of Race Relations/Race Today Collective
> March 1974

Remember the black and white comic book that created a stir last year? Ronald Butt in the *Times* described it as 'a book of great wickedness', Baroness Cox called it 'grotesquely dishonest and blatantly intended to stir up racial conflict'. Predictably, the All London Teachers Against Racism and Fascism recommended it as 'a highly readable yet serious book', particularly suitable for twelve-year-olds; the National Council for Educational Standards cited it as evidence of the 'political subversion of education'. In the House of Lords it was denounced as 'this document which can speak of the abolition of slavery without mentioning Wilberforce, this hotchpotch of half truth and misrepresentation. . .'; the education secretary, Sir Keith Joseph, in a policy statement condemned 'those who . . . want to subvert our fundamental values and institutions':

> I give as an example a recent publication by the oddly called Institute of Race Relations. It is a cartoon book, presumably designed for the young, which, for example, depicts a British judge saying, and I quote: 'I s'pose you are innocent until proven guilty, as long as you are white that is. If you are white *and* wear a blue uniform, however, well, then we all know you are innocent even when proven guilty.'

Within months of its publication *How Racism Came to Britain* (IRR, $2.95) sold out, ran into a second impression, was translated into Dutch. Within months of its publication Britain saw some of the worst race riots ever. A policeman was killed by black youths in Tottenham, at least one commentator seemed to connect the riots with such blatant anti-police propaganda. For most people this comic book came to symbolize race relations at their looniest and most dangerous. Yet three weeks ago, when I began to look at the race relations industry in order to write this piece, there were other candidates which claimed my attention.

Take RAT, for instance. Racial Awareness Therapy is, quite simply, anti-racist brainwashing. Like most well-meaning progressive ideas of our time it was dreamt up in the US—on a Florida military base, in fact, in the late sixties—and has been trying to cross the Atlantic for a while. The Scarman Report on the 1981 riots, with its emphasis on the *cultural* effects of racism on poor blacks, gave RAT the necessary encouragement and today at least a dozen local authorities have ethnic units and ethnic officers and—of course—RATs. I thought I might start by calling on Mrs Pledger of Muriel Street, Islington, the local government employee who was bundled off to a compulsory RAT course by her employers because she failed to invite some of her black colleagues to a party at her residence. Better still, I thought, I would attend a RAT programme and see for myself.

'Don't waste your time with RAT,' an Indian friend who knows the race relations business warned, 'it's just a few blacks trying to make money from guilty whites. One would expect the *Spectator* to write about it: it's too easy a target. Go to the Institute of Race Relations and try to work out this man Sivanandan who runs it. There are people in the left—like Stuart Hall and David Edgar—who take him very seriously. Pluto have published his essays. You'll find a story there.'

I did. It is the story of the race relations industry.

> There are two problems in world politics today which transcend all others. They are the struggle between Communism and liberal democracy, and the problem of race relations. Of the two I am prepared to argue that the problem of race relations is the more important . . . . I therefore put forward the proposition that the interested parties. . . should consider as a matter of urgency the establishment of a Commonwealth Institute of Race Relations for the scientific and objective study of matters related to race and colour. . . .

That was H.V. Hodson, not yet the editor of the *Sunday Times*, speaking at Chatham House on 4 July 1950, and was virtually the birth of race relations. The Empire was breaking up and the 'racial' Punjab massacres of 1947 had troubled a good many observers at the Royal Institute of International Studies. Could 'scientific' study help? Hodson thought it a viable project and set about trying to find some money to back the department that would inaugurate the new discipline.

In 1952 Philip Mason, the former ICS man who had won a reputation from his brilliant history, *The Men Who Ruled India*, decided there was no way he could make a living writing history books and farming a small holding. He arranged to visit London to see his old Balliol friend Harry Hodson. They met at the Athenaeum, where Mason was persuaded to become the director of the body to research the problems of the end of Empire. Shortly after, Dougall Malcomn, chairman of the British South Africa Company, arranged a dinner at Brooks's where he and the other guests—among them Ronald Prain, chairman of Roan Antelope and the Rhodesian Selection Trust, and Harry Oppenheimer—guaranteed £15,000 for the next three years for the Institute.

The African mining interests of the original sponsors were not a coincidence. 'We thought of race relations really as something that didn't happen in England,' Mason recalls. Africa was the crucial area and he pretty soon began to study the racial problems of Kenya, and, later, Rhodesia. 'It's so difficult for people to see now. I talked to the governing body about this and they all said, "Well in England we don't have this problem. We get on very well, there's no colour feeling in England." They were all liberal, you see.' To begin with, Mason agreed with the council. But as he kept his eyes open in England he began to see that 'this was rubbish'. 'About 1954 or 1955 I said to the council we must extend our press cuttings to include Britain. There was going to be a problem quite soon in Britain. They said, "No, no, no, no, no, we're a tolerant people." But I persisted and finally had my way.' The first publication on Britain, however, did not appear till 1958, when the riots in Notting Hill broke out.

Early in 1958, riots between the Tamils and the Sinhalese disturbed life in Ceylon for the first time. Sivanandan was a young Tamil bank manager married to a Sinhalese. Though his home in Ratnamalana was spared, his father's home was attacked. 'The riots were for me my moment of truth.' He decided he had to leave Ceylon. Colonial practices still obtained, so the bank gave him 'home leave', and sent him to England on furlough. (*He chuckles.*) He landed in Notting Hill 'in the middle of the riots. It was a double baptism of fire. I said, that's it. No more banking, no more that.' He bummed around, ending up as teaboy in the library in Kingsbury.

The IRR had, in the meantime, separated itself from Chatham House and moved to 59 Jermyn Street. In the early sixties the Institute—and its director—came to occupy a central place in the newly sprouting race relations business. Mason was a member of the Commonwealth

Immigrants Advisory Council (CIAC), established under the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act so that the home secretary could be advised on the subject. Lady Reading was the chairman of the committee, and was very keen that a more permanent body be established, which would inquire into aspects of race relations. The National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants (NCCI or Nicky) was established and Mason chaired it.

In 1964 Sivanandan joined the IRR as a librarian. He had qualified as a librarian 'at the expense of the British taxpayer', as Philip Mason remarked to me. He was taken on, Mason explained, 'primarily because he was not English. . . in the conventional sense of the word.' 'I was the first black person to be employed by the Institute,' Sivanandan said confidently, then paused. 'Well, the librarian before me also—the reason I said I was the first black person was because she was an upper-class Indian who would not think of herself as non-white. . . . Black in a sense became the colour of our politics.'

The same year a Labour government was returned after thirteen years of Tory rule. Despite election promises to the contrary, it was in no position to repeal the Commonwealth Immigration Act 1962 which halted the free entry of Commonwealth subjects. Patrick Gordon Walker had lost at Smethwick to a Tory candidate who was using the slogan, 'If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Labour.' But the new government wished to make up for this 'betrayal' by expanding NCCI. Little Nicky became Big Nicky. From a budget of £6,000 a year NCCI expanded to £200,000. (In 1966 Big Nicky grew into the Race Relations Board under Mark Bonham Carter.) Initially, it was thought that Mason should continue as chairman but later the Archbishop of Canterbury was roped in 'to bring sanctity to the Holy See of Discrimination' (Sivanandan). Mason served as a member but 'that was the point when I began to feel I was getting out of it. . . . It was becoming very official.' It was at this time that Michael Wharton, in his Peter Simple column in the *Telegraph*, invented the expression 'the race relations industry'.

Mason, as befits a man who has written a book called *The English Gentleman: The Rise and Fall of an Ideal*, believed in running things the old way. 'More and more, they wanted me to run things like a republic. Simon Abbott, my assistant, once said to me, "These days a lot of places run things that way." I said, "Over my dead body." ' He laughs. 'I said I'd meet the staff once a week but I don't believe in committees.'

Mason managed to control his staff. His successor, Hugh Tinker, a professor of Indian history from the School of Oriental and African Studies, was not so fortunate. 'When the trouble began Tinker treated the whole thing as if it were a debating society. It was a government body but he was not an administration man.' Sivanandan, who was a head of department by now, began manipulating Tinker. Two 'issues' were found on which the staff opposed the governing council. Tinker, foolishly perhaps, went along with the—increasingly black and brown—staff. ('He felt a strong sympathy with the sense of wrong that eats at the heart of many black people, and he wanted to do something about it. He told me he wanted a *cause*,' says Mason.)

Chris Mullard, the left-wing professor of ethnic studies at Amsterdam, has recently published an account of the battle at the IRR which led to the takeover in 1972 by Sivanandan, *Race, Power and Resistance* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, £19.95); unfortunately it is far too ideological and does not capture the 'fun' of the whole thing. A two-hour conversation with Sivanandan gives one a clearer picture of what went on. I ask: 'Did Tinker support you ideologically?' 'What ideology? Nobody knew what ideology there was. It was black but it was also white. I was liberal, we were playing democracy.' He laughs. Was there total confusion then? 'No, we knew what we were talking about. That's the great thing about democracy. . . . The practitioners know what they are talking about. You think when Thatcher says *democracy* she doesn't know what she is talking about? She means democracy for the white and not for the black. She means democracy for the rich and not for the poor. In this case we were the Thatchers . . . ha ha ha. . . .'

One reason why England has been singularly free of revolution is that the establishment has a way of accommodating the bright have-nots, neutralizing potential dissent. At one time it used to be done through the Church; nearer our time, until the advent of Mrs Shirley Williams, grammar schools served that function; Oxford and Cambridge have always done so. Race relations committees are in precisely that tradition, yet they attract unfavourable attention. The left complains because it hates to see good men being bought, the right complains because it hates to see good money being wasted.

The point about committees is that they are supposed to numb those who sit on them. In 1965, however, a man called Michael de Freitas—a.k.a. Abdul Malik, a.k.a. Michael X—came to London from the

Caribbean and formed the Racial Action Adjustment Society (RAAS). No committee ever contained *him*. For one, it was a purely cynical exercise to shake some money out of Whitey: *raas* in patois is a corruption of the English word 'arse', the RAAS lads were known in the community as *de raas clath boys*. (A *raas clath* is a tampon.) But what distinguished RAAS was not the cynicism with which it was run: it was its aggressive militancy, a militancy designed not just to frighten Whitey but to impress him into *paying*. And the money did come pouring in: from pop stars, from fashionable people. Richard West recalls a journalist coming away 'transformed' by a chance encounter. She kept blubbering about his power and potency. Eventually, West asked what Michael X had said to her. 'Oh, he just said: "Fuck off, Whitey." '

It sounds odd, but a little force gets you a long way with liberals. Michael X understood this perfectly. It is no coincidence Sivanandan is an admirer of Michael X. In an essay called 'From Resistance to Rebellion' (*A Different Hunger*, Pluto Press, £3.95), Sivanandan defends his hero from the standard charges posterity has laid against him, criminality and thuggery. 'The line between politics and crime, after all, is a thin one, in a capitalist society.'

Sivanandan is not Michael X but he is playing the RAAS game and he knows the value of talking tough. 'If you look behind my desk,' he said to me, 'you will find an iron stick.'

'Have you ever needed to use that stick?'

He smiles cunningly. 'I won't answer that.' Somehow I do not think he has ever used it, but he wants me to believe that he has. Then he laughs loudly, cynically. 'Write: "I'm a mild-mannered man not given to violence." ' He is really pleased with his joke. He is cunning *and* tough.

Playing tough with softies, pretending you're a liberal then suddenly pulling a left hook, is a game of which Sivanandan has much experience. The takeover of the Institute—the 'palace revolution' as he likes to call it—was achieved just that way. 'We were playing on a liberal basis. We fought on the basis of journalistic freedom. Then academic freedom. We had no interest in these liberal arguments. We were exploiting them. You need to be a peasant like me to be able to do these things.'

The end came swiftly. One day during a meeting of the council Sivanandan gave the call and the staff occupied the chamber. ('Plush carpets, superb furniture . . . thirty or forty of us, just came into the boardroom. . . . It became so crowded, I remember there was a fat girl called Barbara Omar seated on the table in front of Lord Boyle. When Boyle tried to address the Chair he had to get around her buttocks. There was a Nigerian girl Obokoye with a shrill voice who kept shouting: *How dare you talk this way?* They were never used to seeing black women sitting on tables. Their manners threw them into dismay. They said, "Where are your manners?" I said, "To hell with your manners." At that point they panicked and said: "Right. You want democracy. All right we'll put it to the membership." We said, "OK, an extraordinary general meeting will decide whether Sandy Kirby is to go or stay, whether Race Today is to be shut down." '

The EGM was held at St James's Piccadilly on 18 April 1972. The Black Unity and Freedom party were handing out leaflets. It was a massive meeting. The press, everybody was there. The staff won, but not fairly; 'Eighty-eight per cent of the membership voted for us—I'll tell you the reason. . . .' Sivanandan grows conspiratorial. He is under the impression that I am doing this article solely for an Indian paper—he does not know I will be writing it for the *Spectator* as well. If he had known that, he would not have told the full story. 'I think I can go on record now. The membership had to be okayed by the council. But for the first time we had staff representation on the council.' He is triumphant now. 'What we did was for many months without their knowledge,' his voice drops for the last three words, then he mutters, 'This is for the Indian audience only—what we did was to recruit *black* members by paying their membership out of our own salaries.' He looks around, fearful lest his past should catch up with him, ruin the elation. 'We paid out of our own salaries—because most of our black friends—brothers and sisters—didn't have the money.' Nor, one suspects, the inclination. But I am not in the mood for a quibble. In his boastfulness he has admitted on record—for the first time—that the takeover was fraudulent. My little Aiwa tape machine looks pleased.

The council resigned when they heard the verdict. 'It was all in the papers the next day. . . . By this time the thing had become international. There were people writing from the United States, from France, from Holland.' Sivanandan looks as pleased as my Aiwa machine.

When the council resigned the IRR lost all its money. It moved from Jermyn Street to a leaking warehouse on Pentonville Road. Sivanandan became director and most of the staff lost their jobs. But all was not lost. The World Council of Churches gave the IRR a large grant, more recently the Gulbenkian Foundation, the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam and the GLC have helped out: under Ken

Livingstone's regime the GLC paid out £300,000 to the IRR, £120,000 of it as a capital grant towards buying their present premises on Leeke Street.

The sad thing about Sivanandan and his Institution is not that he makes a living out of race. If that was all he did he would be harmless. After all, the immigrants have genuine grievances, real problems. If he made a little noise about their problems and in turn got some money for drawing the authorities' attention, everyone would be better off. But Sivanandan is into something else.

Philip Mason, in his second volume of memoirs, *A Thread of Silk* (Michael Russell, $9.95), calls it 'Fanonandaism—the views of Frantz Fanon interpreted by our librarian Sivanandan. In reply to the white cruelty and contempt which he had encountered in Algeria, Frantz Fanon had expressed in his writings a reaction no less violent and unreasoning, a blind hatred of everything white, a rejection of Western culture, a glorification of violence as good in itself.' Later in the same chapter Mason tells of the occasion when 'Siva, whose temper was hot, who admired violence', had to be restrained from throttling the telephonist.

I think Mason does Fanon an injustice. Reading *Black Skin, White Masks* (reissued in 1986 by Pluto Press, $4.95) and comparing his work with Sivanandan's one is immediately aware of Fanon's subtlety. The penultimate chapter of the book contains a section called 'The Negro and Hegel' which discusses Hegel's idea that 'self consciousness exists. . .only by being acknowledged or recognized.'

> There is not an open conflict between white and black. One day the White Master, *without conflict*, recognised the Negro slave.
>
> But the former slave wants to *make himself recognised*. . . .'
>
> He who is reluctant to recognise me oppose me. . . .
>
> One day a good white master who had influence said to his friends, 'Let's be nice to the niggers. . . .'
>
> The other masters argued, for after all it was not an easy thing, but then they decided to promote the machine animal men to the supreme rank of *men*.
>
> *Slavery shall no longer exist on French soil*. . . .
>
> But the Negro knows nothing of the cost of freedom, for he has not fought for it. From time to time he has fought for

> Liberty and Justice, but these were always white liberty and justice. . . .
>
> When it does happen that the Negro looks fiercely at the white man, the white man tells him: 'Brother there is no difference between us.' And yet the Negro *knows* there is a difference. He *wants* it. He wants the white man to turn on him and shout: 'Damn nigger.' Then he would have that unique chance—'show them'. . . .
>
> But most often there is nothing—nothing but indifference, or a paternalistic curiosity.
>
> The former slave needs a challenge to his humanity, he wants a conflict, a riot. . . .

Now compare this generalized statement of the case with Sivanandan's specific complaints: (I am not making these up as I go along, I have them all on tape, scattered throughout the interview. I have added nothing. Even the emphasis is there.)

> You ask why is it that the Director of the Institute of Race Relations didn't know that I the librarian was a troublemaker. . . Because he thought I was a *nice coolie boy*. Who would behave himself and say yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir. And I did. For four years. . . . They didn't even *look*. They're *high-class people*. They wouldn't look at little me. . . . They (Mason and others) were so cocky. This is what I mean about paternalism. Paternalism forgets you are a human being. Paternalism says: well, I am responsible for you like I am responsible for a dog. . .

This is race relations at its deadliest. Can it be that the passage from Fanon explains the takeover of the IRR, or even the hatred in the comic book? It was Sivanandan who gave me all the photocopies of the angry response to the book. He looked completely victorious. 'Look, look, they even mentioned us in the House of Lords!'

The Spectator
23 August, 1986

Gaddafi Tells NAM a Truth or Two

To appreciate the sensational effect Colonel Muammar Gaddafi had when he spoke at the NAM summit on Thursday one must first understand how incredibly boring the whole business is—let other journalists complain about the duty-free booze the NAM delegates have access to: I shan't. Poor things, they need every drop of it if they are to remain sane at the end of the day.

Consider the following:

> 'When we last met in New Delhi in 1983, the leadership of our movement devolved upon the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi. Tragedy forestalled the realization of her visions for the non-aligned movement. However, under guidance of her successor, Mr Rajiv Gandhi, we have kept the spirit of the movement. We now welcome the leadership of our hosts—Zimbabwe.
>
> Those of us who were here, present at the birth of this nation in 1980, need no reminder of the commitment of Zimbabwe to freedom and independence. . . We meet at a critical moment in human history. Today the forces of creativity and the forces of destruction are locked in a titanic struggle. On the outcome depends the future of the human species. On the outcome depends the destiny of our planet. We the poor, we the under-privileged of the world, are on the frontline. It was in large measure, to correct this imbalance between power and people that the non-alignment movement was founded in Belgrade twenty-five years ago. . . .
>
> It is true that the non-aligned movement has addressed the urgencies of our time. It has made progress on some critical issues. Decolonization has reached its last phase. The outlines of a new international economic order, the framework of a new information order have largely been completed. Yet we cannot be satisfied with these efforts.
>
> Today global arms expenditures are in the region of $ 1000 billion. We have condemned and excoriated the superpowers for this escalation. . .'

It doesn't matter who said it, somebody did: In fact, everybody did. If I had the same disregard for newsprint as the NAM speakers have had for our time I would quote at greater length. The world paper situation being what it is, this short extract will have to suffice.

Alternatively, consider the standing mess in the middle of the plush gold and purple conference hall and you will understand a great deal about NAM.

Opposite the chairman and to his left and right sit the 101 delegations. The space in the centre forms an empty square of polished parquet tile. Well not exactly empty. Some bright spark has decided to clumsily spread two large sheets of black plastic on one side of the square. On these islands of plastic is strewn sawdust masquerading as moss. On the moss lie logs of driftwood.

Around these logs some vases of *Strelitzia* (birds of paradise) are meant to be arranged. I suppose to begin with they were arranged. Then someone evidently knocked the vases down. For the past three days they have remained that way, no one has bothered to pick them up to clear the mess, or even to mop away the scattered saw dust. Thirty million Zimbabwe dollars have been spent on this summit by the organizers, yet bang in the middle of the gleaming summit hall, right under Rajiv Gandhi's nose, an incredible eyesore is allowed to stand.

Perhaps I am being unfair, perhaps the organizers haven't yet noticed these huge strewn flowers, perhaps nobody has. It is quite conceivable that the speeches have taken their toll and delegates and organizers alike are in a state of permanent stupor.

Into the world of duty-free liquor and platitudes, plushness and knocked-down vases that remain knocked down, enter a man who speaks his mind. No matter if you think he is mad. No matter if half the 'civilized' world thinks he is mad. The important thing is he speaks what he thinks, not what other people think he ought to think. The effect is astonishing.

At the airport on Monday night the confusion began. Upon arriving, Col Gaddafi chose to address the journalists in Arabic. The translator had the Libyan leader saying he had come to 'crush' NAM. Col Gaddafi, who speaks fluent English, stepped in, corrected the inept translator, saying he had come to 'surpass NAM and to make his own contribution to divide the world into the anti-imperialist and the imperialist camps'.

What could he mean? All kinds of speculation began. On Wednesday, however, the Zimbabwean minister of information, briefing the press did his best to scotch all rumours that Gaddafi intended to break off from NAM, or even that he was not in sympathy with the ideals of the movement.

On Thursday morning Gaddafi was the first speaker. As he climbed onto the podium the Libyan leader did not look like a glamorous terrorist but rather like a bespectacled, fairly serious don. Over his dark suit and burgundy turtleneck sweater he wrapped a cream coloured tunic but he wore it with little panache: for most of the time it looked like an oversized cardigan a middle-aged academic might wear on a weekend.

His entourage, however, didn't fit in with this image. On his right stood one uniformed male bodyguard and four pretty girls in combat fatigues, lined up like cheerleaders at an American football game.

The seventy-minute speech was delivered in Arabic without notes and in fairly low key. Gaddafi himself didn't go in for histrionics. For the first half of the speech his cardigan kept slipping of his right shoulder. And since he hadn't circulated his speech in advance—he hadn't even submitted a copy to the summit authorities—no one seemed to know what to expect.

A few minutes into the speech there was just the familiar stuff about how he was glad to be able to come to Zimbabwe to meet his friends—the freedom fighters in Zipra and Zanila—about how caps and arsenals would be at the service of freedom fighters everywhere, in particular, the Nicaraguans, the PLO, Unita, ANC and PAC.

Then he paused and the cheerleaders took over, began shouting slogans in Arabic, ending with the hardly shocking chant, 'Down, down, USA, down, down, USA.' The speech promised to be another boring Gaddafi routine, so much so that half of the Indian delegates in the hall didn't bother to wear their earphones to hear the English translation. K.R. Narayanan and N.P. Jain were engaged in conversation.

Then Gaddafi, his voice still in low key, his manner just as subdued, took off. He had come to meet his friends Castro, Ortega and the leaders of the front-line states. 'As regards NAM I did not come for this purpose because I do not believe there is any use in this movement and I am fully confident that most of those who are gathered here today are not in support of the people or of the cause of liberty or freedom. I said in Colombo that in the coming conference I shall unveil the truth of this movement and now the time has come.'

He then proceeded to denounce the 'puppets and spies' who littered NAM, in particular going for Egypt ('A country that has given its whole territory to the US') Zaire, the Cameroons and the Ivory Coast for recognizing Israel ('Is it not belittling for a revolutionary like myself to sit beside these puppets?').

Later he went for the former French colonies, the Francophone countries—('Are not independent states the fifth line among us, the spies. . .I do not recognize that they enjoy sovereignty') and even the Commonwealth countries ('The British colonies cannot be independent when they are members of the Commonwealth. . .The word is a very bad word, a shameful word. It means the common wealth of Britain, it means you are the property of Britain').

Outside NAM the European countries came in for some stick: 'South Africa is the dirty leg of America and Israel is the other leg', and America, of course, is what 'our Iranian brothers call Satan'.

The abuse certainly livened things up. I saw Rajiv smile and on one occasion even scribble a joke and pass it on to Guyana's Desmond Hoyte sitting on his right. But it was the criticisms of the movement that really struck a chord with the jaded press corps. 'Jeezuz man,' a fairly cynical hack enthused after the speech, 'there were quite a few home truths there.'

Trevor Grundy and Tim Leach, two Harare-based journalists promptly composed a song *The Green Book* with verses which went like this:

You can bomb Tri-po-li
You can bomb Bey-root
But you've gotta admit
That Gadaffi's quite cute
He's got the Greeeeen Book,
The Greeeeen Book,
The Greeeeen Book.
You better come to NAM
You gotta hear some truths
From this wonderful man
He wrote the Green Book
The Greeeeen Book
The Greeeeen Book

'What is this international fallacy?' Gaddafi asked rhetorically, striking at the very concept of NAM. 'I cannot deceive the people. I do not believe there is a first, second, third world. I believe there is a camp for liberation and freedom and another camp for imperialism.'

Most of his criticisms were directed against the wishy-washy ineffectiveness of NAM. 'When Ortega was in trouble did you send him a message of solidarity and support? What will he do with that message?' The international powers, he said, are happy now with this movement because it is a big farce, 'an international farce for more than a hundred countries. You just meet every three years and exchange smiles.' Rajiv smiled.

Gaddafi then turned his attention on NAM's grandiose declarations on disarmament. In a typical instance of this, Robert Mugabe in his press conference on 29 August had boasted that the fact we had not had a Third World War 'can also be explained from the point of view that there is an arresting mechanism in our society today' i.e. NAM. After a significant pause he had added generously, 'there are other reasons too'. 'What does the movement do about disarmament?' Gaddafi asked pointedly. 'You don't have arms. What can the movement do about the preservation of world peace? Your voice is not heard. The ones that can take decisions are the superpowers. . . . Your statements calling for peace will be put in the dustbin.'

'India', Gaddaffi went on, 'can be a neutral country because it has reached the production of the atom bomb and its population is one-third (*sic*) of the world. It is very difficult for the US to absorb India as it did with Grenada. Likewise with China. But the small countries have no such protection. All these ministers will be swept away by the American troops as Hitler did with the European states.'

Gaddafi next offered a novel perspective on detente. 'If there is detente among superpowers then there will be wars between us small states.'

But it was clear it was not really this prospect that excited him. What obsesses Gaddafi is the memory of the US raid on Libya in April and NAM's failure to come to his aid. 'What is the use of this movement if it is unable to defend a member when the member is occupied?' Again and again Gaddaffi would come to that.

Robert Mugabe held his head in his hands. Paunchy Yasser Arafat dressed in bottle-green flared trousers and Chelsea boots, stared with his mouth open. By now all the members of the Indian delegation in the conference hall—Rajiv, Shiv Shankar, K.R. Narayanan, A.P. Venkateswaran, Gopi Arora, Sharda Prasad, N.P. Jain and Natwar Singh—had their earphones on. Occasionally Rajiv would take off his earphones to share a joke—presumably at Gadaffi's expense—with

Natwar Singh. At one point Sharda Prasad reclined his head so that it appeared he was sleeping.

Every fifteen minutes or so Gaddaffi would stop for a while and his cheerleaders would break out in Arabic slogans in praise of the *Jamahariya* (the state of the masses). When he made a particularly trenchant point, it was mostly the Iranians and a few Latin Americans who cheered him.

If Gaddaffi made sense in some of his criticism of NAM, his proposals were fantastic. 'I am ready to form an international world force so as to spread fire under the feet of America. I stand ready to go out of Libya so as not to be concerned as a head of state and I shall call for the establishment of an army of tens of thousands. The aircraft carriers will not be able to engage against this army. These soldiers cannot be reached by America whose empire I can defeat and destroy their existence everywhere. The numbers of our army will increase day by day because all the peoples of the world hate this arch Satan. . .'

But was Gaddaffi going to leave NAM? It was as if he kept changing his mind as he went along. He had begun by saying that since Libya was a democracy he would put the matter before the people's committees. Later he said that he had come to 'declare that I am free from this gathering which harbours spies'. Still later he declared that he was going to abolish the movement altogether. Having spoken for seventy minutes he suddenly bid farewell to this 'funny movement' and apologized for having spoken at such length.

In the summit hall the response was very weak. Amongst the Indian delegation only Rajiv and Shiv Shankar clapped. With Rajiv it was three measured mild claps. Considering the speed with which Gaddaffi left the hall with Castro and Ortega it is unlikely he heard Robert Mugabe's response. Thanking Gaddaffi for his speech, Mugabe observed that, 'Not all of us will agree that the movement has no purpose. Not all of us will agree that it is useless.' Predictably Mugabe got a large hand. It was reassuring for all the delegates to be taken back to the NAM fantasy.

Mugabe went on to say that NAM had never condoned the US raid on Libya and then, as if oblivious to Gadaffi's mockery of its statements, reminded Gaddaffi that NAM had put out a statement of solidarity with Libya—here he paused significantly, then resumed—'on that question'. It was clear there would be precious few statements of solidarity with Libya on other questions.

Outside the summit hall reporters swarmed around Gaddaffi and it was clear he was enjoying every minute of it as he strutted around with no obvious purpose except to be seen. (Later, less explicably, he slapped his bodyguard on the face.) Iran's President Khameni who incidentally had not heard the entire speech came up to the Libyan and congratulated him. 'This is exactly what NAM needs—courage.'

The other leaders were not as complimentary. Within hours Egypt's foreign minister Boutros Ghali dismissed the speech as 'nothing more than a comedy staged by a mentally disturbed head of state who lives in a state of political backwardness and adolescence'. The Cameroons, the Ivory Coast and Zaire put out a joint statement expressing their 'profound indignation' at the 'senseless declaration'.

The Indian delegation did not come up with a statement, preferring to strike a pose of cool condescension. But one imagines they must have been piqued by Gadaffi's attempt to hog the publicity and, more important, alter the focus of public attention from South Africa to himself. 'He's a madman,' Rajiv is known to have remarked privately. 'He's going to join the Warsaw Pact, isn't he?'

For the press, the Western press particularly, Gaddaffi was a Godsend. The speech ended at 11.10 a.m. By 1 p.m. a colleague had made $900 by sending out five radio spots to the US.

Remember that famous line in *Gone with the Wind:* 'There's a fortune to be made in the rise and fall of every civilization.' This week it was vindicated afresh: across the border, in Cape Town, the Anglican Church charged $32 for every second recorded by radio and television of Bishop Tutu's enthronement as Archbishop. And why not?

'Doesn't he realize he's played straight into American hands?' Prof Haasu Patel, the left-wing professor of politics at Harare University exclaimed to me just after the event. 'But the damage is only temporary. The media's attention may be diverted from South Africa for a day but in the end Gaddaffi will prove to be just an interesting diversion.'

I hope so. But I fear the reasons why Gaddaffi makes such a 'story' goes deeper into human psychology. It is as if he has, with his antics, articulated a mood of our time. On my way to lunch after the Gaddaffi speech, passing the aptly named New Africa House, I saw advertisements for videos of *Wild Geese Two* (they're 'back in the most spectacular rescue mission ever filmed') and Stallone's *Commando.* (Apart from Libyan films, the building contains a cocktail bar, a unisex salon and, yes, in New Africa House, the Parisian school.)

At a new information order seminar at the Mandel training centre in Harare two weeks ago, there was great concern about what the 'imperialist spies' would do to 'distort the priorities of non-alignment' in their reportage.

I suppose those NIO people are appalled by the way Gaddaffi hijacked the story of the week and by the cynicism of most of the Western press towards NAM. (Question: How do you describe a turd on a loo seat? Answer: A non-aligned movement.) That is the latest joke that cracks them up at Sandros's, the Sardinian restaurant where the foreign press hangs out in Harare.

But Gadaffi's critique of non-alignment goes deeper than that and it deserves to be heard. Besides, the people want to hear about something that is news. The new information order, for all its democratic jargon, is sadly, far more totalitarian than that which it seeks to replace.

On Tuesday, Iran's President Khameini mysteriously vanished from our television screens in the middle of his speech at the NAM plenary session, just at the point when he began to ask for Iraq's expulsion from the movement on the grounds that it was an aggressor.

The spokesman of the Iranian foreign ministry, Murtaza Sarmadi, told me that when he complained about this to the Zimbabwean authorities he was initially informed that the secretary-general of NAM had ordered the blackout. If that's the new information order, heaven preserve us and our freedoms.

The Sunday Observer
7 September, 1986

Caught 'Spying' in Lanka

That Indo-Lankan relations are at a low ebb is well-known but it is by no means a simple relationship of hatred or fear as I learnt when I was detained earlier this week for four-and-a-half hours at the police station at Padukkai, a small town twenty miles from Colombo.

Corporal Wijenayaka A.W. Perera of the Sri Lanka Armoured Corps was driving an armoured car at the Nelliady army camp on Monday when the LTTE offensive took him and his colleagues by surprise. It was the first attack since the LTTE declared a truce when the food supplies started and it has raised questions even within Sri Lanka as to the extent of the army's control of the Vadamarachchi area. Sixteen soldiers died in the Nelliady attack. Corporal Perera was one of them.

On Wednesday I went to Padukkai to attend Corporal Perera's funeral. War is new to modern Lanka and each casualty of the Jaffna engagement is treated as a hero. Every soldier killed in action is posthumously promoted and his family receives his full pay till the year he would have retired, after which they continue to receive his 'pension'. The funerals are grand affairs with a military band and full honours.

Padukkai's streets were wreathed with little white flags. I reached an hour before the funeral was scheduled to begin and made for corporal—now sergeant—Perera's home, a small tiled roof cottage called Somi Nivasa. I sought out his father, a retired policeman, and condoled, then explained I wished to attend the funeral. The father welcomed me.

The body was sealed in a wooden coffin surrounded by anturiam wreaths erected on makeshift tripods. Corporal Perera's distraught mother wailed as she received those who came to pay their last respects. Even the joss sticks could not drive out the sweet sickly smell of death. I left the room.

Outside in the compound, I spoke to some of Sergeant Perera's colleagues in uniform who directed me to Lt Siriwardene, the senior officer present. When I introduced myself Lt Siriwardene became wary. 'Are you a Sri Lankan citizen?' he asked. I replied I was an Indian working for a British paper. 'An Indian?' I could see he was seeing red.

By this time the coffin was brought into the compound where a dozen Buddhist monks seated on chairs were busy sipping a pink bottled drink called Necto. The compound filled out with people, five hundred perhaps. All around us was the luxuriant overgrowth of an unmanageable garden.

The monks spoke into a portable microphone. The first one was fairly relaxed but the others—younger, more militant monks who grew their hair—delivered intense funeral orations in which they averred this was just the beginning, that many more lives had to be lost in the cause of the Sinhala nation. Some of the older monks dozed under the shade of black umbrellas, others spat globs of betel juice into the enamel spittoons at their feet.

After the orations the military band struck up a dirge and Sergeant Perera's body was mounted on a gun carrier. I found a mourner who could speak English, asked him what the population of Padukkai was. He said he didn't know. I then asked what guns the soldiers were carrying. He asked another soldier who replied in incomprehensible Sinhala. I asked: 'Is it a carbine?' My guide thought I said calibre. 'That is a state secret,' he replied.

As I began to move with the bier Lt Siriwardene caught up with me. 'I am afraid you will have to stay with me.' I showed him my accreditation papers including those issued by the ministry of state in Colombo but he was not satisfied.

Instead he found the nearest police constables—two amiable men in khaki who identified themselves as 5833 and 16037—and directed them to detain me at the police station till he came. Protesting, I was led off.

For a spy I was treated with great consideration at the police station. But a curious crowd collected outside Padukkai police station and there was much pointing and exclamation. In time the mourner who could speak English turned up at the police station. I thought he might have come to help me. He had come to record a statement against me. He did not naturally want to talk to me. He kept his eyes low but a companion of his accosted me. 'You asked him the population of Padukkai?' I said yes. 'And you asked the calibre?' 'Carbine, not calibre,' I said. The companion went into the room where the statement against me was being recorded, then returned. 'Please tell me, what is carbon?'

By the time the officer in charge, Anjunawela, finally turned up. Padukkai was agog with rumour about the Indian spy. Before he could attend to me he was besieged with inquiry and telephone calls.

When I showed him my papers Anjunawela was embarrassed, then laughed. 'You can record a statement and go.' In Sinhala he chided the constables for holding me, then offered me a Coke.

I said I wanted to speak to Lt Siriwardene. I was not angry, I just wanted to ask him some questions.

After quite a few telephone calls Lt Siriwardene was located at the Rock House camp, beyond Colombo. He didn't want to speak to me.

Eventually he came on the phone. He was apologetic about the episode. I asked, 'Didn't you detain me because I said I was an Indian?' He hedged a bit then came out open. 'Yes. A reporter can be used by any party.' Which party? 'Now I know you are a north Indian and the Tamils are different from you. But those fellows also come from India. . .'

He was referring to the Sinhalese belief grounded in the fact that their ancestors migrated from Bengal and Bihar to Sri Lanka in approximately 500 BC. Though many Indians are unaware of this, the Sinhalese regard themselves as north Indians, even subscribe to an Aryan ancestry. It is this that makes their recent anger and sense of betrayal even more poignant.

The Sunday Observer
12 July, 1987

In the Lair of the Tamil Tigers

The most important thing one must realize about the Jaffna peninsula is that it is divided in a very real way. Some of it—notably Vadamarachchi, which was 'liberated' in May—is held by the Sri Lankan armed forces: the best part of it is held by the Tamil Tigers. Between the two holdings lies a no-man's-land full of destruction and coconuts. Crossing over between Kankesanturai and Tellipallai, my hands held over my head, I stumbled onto the rotting head of a dog. Even the vultures had preferred to stay away.

The new nation—Eelam—was to have been declared on 1 January this year but the Tigers never got around to it. Even so it is not quite Sri Lanka that one steps into when one crosses the barbed wire barricades which the soldiers in khaki man. You cannot bomb civilians from the air and then claim they are your own, that you have merely been restoring 'the civil administration'. You cannot bomb temples and churches, shell hospitals and dispensaries and then hope for a 'political solution'. Lalith Athulathmudali, the Oxford-educated minister for national security in Colombo talks of the 'campaign for hearts and minds and stomachs'. It is clear he has not been across the lines to Tiger-held Jaffna.

When one talks of the bombing and strafing of civilian targets by the Sri Lankan air force it is only fair to record that there is reason to believe that the Tigers take shelter behind such targets, perhaps even provoke the air force to attack. It is difficult to fight clean when fighting guerrillas.

Take the recent case of the strafing and burning of the temple at Varani. On 14 July just before dusk a Sri Lankan air force helicopter passed above the temple, circled once then circled again, strafing the temple, whose thatched roof immediately caught fire. In Jaffna I met a Red Cross official who had been at Varani overseeing the distribution of rations when the attack occurred. He confirmed hearing two loud blasts which he presumed to have been rockets fired from the helicopter.

Two miles away, from across the lagoon that separates Tennemarachchi from Vadamarachchi, Tiger territory from forces territory, Brigadier Jerry Silva too watched the incident. He claims that the Tigers fired on the chopper. The two loud blasts, he said to me, were mortars fired by the Tigers. (At other places in Vadamarachchi Brigadier Silva showed me temples where the Tigers had built defences and dug elaborate trenches.)

But even if Silva is correct, need the helicopter have circled a second time? Could it not have flown away, especially since the Varani temple was a recognized 'sanctuary', a place refugees from Vadamarachchi had been urged to take shelter in through announcements on Jaffna Radio? There were nearly 2,000 men, women and children living in the temple complex when it was burnt down. Miraculously, there were no casualties, but the people of Varani are unlikely to forgive this assault.

In a back number of the *Saturday Review*, a weekly run by the last Sinhalese left in Jaffna, I read a poem called 'Doomsday'.

> There is a sense of doom and gloom in Jaffna.
> The boys are there on sentry duty.
> The army is there itching to come out. . .
> No petrol, no diesel, no kerosene but the bicycles are there.
> The Jaffna people are a hardy lot hard to match in their fortitude.
> In the wake of death and disaster they somehow carry on gala weddings and festivals.
> Kanjeepuram sarees, gold *Thali-Kodies*, the bright *pottus* and what not. . .

Not poetry that reverberates, but its bland record says something of the irony of living in Jaffna. At Gnanam's hotel where I stayed—the only other guests were the Red Cross people—you can still get Foster's lager and elaborate Chinese meals built around Jaffna shrimps. ('We cater to all needs,' reads the chalked notice, 'order your bits with your liqueur.') The beer—like the Cokes and Fantas—still comes in from Colombo through a lorry service, run by enterprising Muslims, which has to negotiate the various sentry points—Tamil and Sinhalese—near Elephants Pass. The Tigers don't drink Coke—it is part of their rejection of Colombo—but the rest of Jaffna does not share their qualms. It is just the higher price that puts them off.

The picture can be misleading, though. Before the six Indian Red Cross officials got in on 25 June, Jaffna, I am told, was like a town hit by plague. Today, confidence restored, carefully preserved Austin Somersets and Morris Minors make gracious progress down the roads. (Unlike Colombo there are no flash Japanese cars here.) But that's also because the shortage of petrol has eased. (Petrol in May used to cost more than Rs 200 (£5) a gallon: now it is a mere Rs 74, only Rs 14 more than Colombo.)

After the aerial bombing began in May the cinemas in Jaffna closed down but colourful posters regularly advertise films like *The Stud* which can be viewed on fifty-seven-inch video screens every day at 10.30, 2.00 and 5.30. But the signs, too, deceive. I did not go to see Joan Collins perform but locals who did tell me coyly that Tiger censorship regulations will not permit 'the hot bits'. On Victoria Road the signboard outside the G.S. Ladies' Academy announces that the establishment instructs young ladies in flower-making, dress-making, even 'cake-icing'. It is only when you go inside and get a whiff of ether that you discover the academy has been converted into an emergency dispensary by Dr V. Selvaratnam. There are branches of the Bank of Ceylon and they are even open some of the time, but you cannot draw cash even if you hold an account. The banks will not keep money, so customers have to cash cheques at grocery stores which charge a four per cent commission for the service.

More than anything else, it is the charts on the medical superintendent's walls at the Jaffna teaching hospital that tell you how keen the people have been to leave their homes in recent months. (The hospital has been shelled by the Sri Lanka army on several occasions and the government in Colombo has even ordered its closure: Dr Nachchinarkininian has just defied orders and kept it open.)

	Admissions	*Outpatient attendance*	*Inpatient days*	*Condoms issued*
JAN	3,776	21,242	28,932	470
FEB	3,331	19,756	24,687	530
MAR	3,382	18,121	25,403	350
APR	2,526	17,530	15,115	380
MAY	1,719	9,898	8,624	210

The hospital is some 600 yards from Jaffna Fort where the Sri Lankan army is garrisoned. (Helicopters fly in with supplies for the troops who are otherwise isolated.) Beyond the hospital, there are no Austin Somersets, no people at all. On my first day in Jaffna, an innocent abroad, I ventured beyond, along the empty bunkers on Vembaddy Road. In the background 300 yards away one could hear the rat-a-tat of sniping but it all seemed somehow remote. A greying man in his forties cycled up and offered to show me around. We walked past Lockwood House, the Methodist pastor's bungalow. The walls had been knocked down, replaced by sandbags. Behind them, the luxurious overgrowth of an unmanageable tropical garden concealed the deserted building. 'Five months ago the boys used this as their forward position,' my guide explained. 'Now they've moved ahead to the Hotel Ashok.'

We walked up to the clocktower where barbed-wire barricades divide Jaffna town from Jaffna Fort. As I greedily picked up shell fragments as souvenirs a sentry from the Tiger outpost at the Hotel Ashok began waving frantically. He tried explaining that we were in the direct line of fire but it was not much good as I did not understand Tamil.

There were some twenty dishevelled Tigers in sarongs camping in the shelled hotel. Few wore shirts but each wore around his neck an amulet containing a capsule of potassium cyanide. Till the fighting began the Ashok had been the smartest hotel in town: the billboard at Palaly airforce airport advertising its old luxury had acquired a new meaning: 'Capture the peninsula's magic from Hotel Ashok.'

The sentries at the hotel were not keen on my going ahead and taking pictures. My friend—who was in the process of persuading me to move into his home at a cheaper tariff than Gnanam's—began negotiating with them in Tamil. All of a sudden they agreed. We scurried across to the cricket ground of the Jaffna training college and took shelter from stray sniping under the scoreboard. Later we crouched along the frontline to the Jaffna public library where I merrily clicked away.

The next day I mentioned this escapade to a senior Tiger, Yogi. Sometime later, he asked me casually: 'Who was that man with you?' I told him. 'We are very angry with him,' Yogi said. 'It appears in trying to impress you he told our sentries a lie. He said Rahim had given you permission to visit the frontline. We don't allow journalists there as it is heavily mined.'

That night I felt a terrible guilt and wondered what would happen to Sivanesan. I did not go to stay with him.

Eventually I did meet one man who had been taken in for questioning by the Tigers. His story is an interesting one but I fear I cannot tell it, as it would immediately identify him and the consequences would not be pleasant. He is no friend of the Tigers but he did admit that some of them—especially those in senior positions like Kittu and Rahim—were reasonable men. When they had taken him away for questioning his family and friends automatically assumed that he would be shot but eventually the Tigers released him after he had convinced them of his essential innocence.

Then there is the case of the proprietor of Kunam Video Club, a small video-cassette rental outfit across the road from my hotel. The day after I got into Jaffna the owner was visited by a group of Tigers who wished to examine some of his cassettes. An adult film called *Inter Movement* did not stand up to their scrutiny: its 'hot' bits had not been properly excised by the proprietor. He was asked to burn the cassette. He, in turn, asked an employee to do this.

The Tigers were not amused. They now required him to stand on the street and ignite the cassette himself, just by his shop. After this humiliation the video club remained closed for the rest of my stay in Jaffna.

Both these men resent the army for what it is doing to the Jaffna peninsula but equally they have no faith in the Tigers. From them I heard the new refrain: 'We want India to annex the Jaffna peninsula.' I told them it was impossible, even fantastical but they were adamant that it was the only hope they had of living in decency and security.

These men are in a minority but the idea of Jaffna as the twenty-sixth state of the Indian union has been gaining ground ever since the Indian Red Cross officials came here a month ago to distribute food. It is not a new idea but even as recently as 1976 a merger of Jaffna with India was decisively rejected by the Tamils of the peninsula. That year Ambala Vanar fought the Kankesanthurai constituency by-election against the Tamil leader Chelvanaikam on precisely this platform and polled some 200-odd votes in all.

Most of the people in the peninsula, however, seem to back the Tigers and think the LTTE are the only ones who are going to protect them, though they are apt to concede that the Tigers will be unable effectively to resist the Sri Lankan army should it attempt to take Jaffna. Their only hope in that eventuality lies with the Indian Army. I said I had gained the impression that India would not allow Colombo to storm Jaffna. Most of my friends did not believe me though they wished they could.

The morning I was to leave Jaffna the academics at the university were planning to address a seminar on President Jayewardene's 19 December proposals. The discussion had been convened by the commerce students union but Professor Sivatamby, a well-known Tamil literary figure tried to suggest to me that the Tigers were 'really behind the seminar'. He was excited by the prospect. 'It means the boys want a settlement.'

I met Yogi for breakfast. He, too, was planning to attend the seminar. He is a member of the political committee of the LTTE. Did this mean that the Tigers were interested in the 19 December proposals? Of course not, he smirked. 'The only reason I am attending is too find out how *they* feel.' He was referring to the academics, the older, more moderate men of Jaffna who are no longer in control.

How did he feel about a settlement? He was frank: 'We are guerrillas. We have asked for a separate state. We cannot now ask for less. Maybe we are prepared to settle for less but we cannot go on record as saying that. That is our problem. If we give in the Sri Lankans will ditch the agreement and leave us looking like fools. We will lose the respect of the people.'

Later that day, after the seminar, Yogi met Hardeep Puri, the Indian first secretary who had flown into Palaly and crossed the 'border' to discuss the latest peace proposals with the Tigers. Later that week Yogi accompanied Prabhakaran, the supreme commander of the Tigers to Delhi where they hammered out the proposals with Rajiv Gandhi. The Tigers accepted the proposals with reluctance. But the division in Jaffna is far too real to be rubbed away with an accord.

The Spectator
1 August, 1987

Delhi in Secret Pay-Off to Tigers

India agreed to pay the Tamil Tigers large sums of money as part of a secret deal to persuade them to accept peace in Sri Lanka, the *Observer* has learnt.

The deal, involving regular payments of more than £200,000 a month and economic aid to the Jaffna peninsula of £43 million, was offered to get the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to agree to the peace accord signed between Indian and Sri Lanka last July. Full payments appear not to have been made and secret talks are thought to have been resumed in India on new financial arrangements.

The agreement—the existence of which has never been officially acknowledged nor, more sensitively, approved by the Indian Congress—was revealed by the Indian high commissioner in Sri Lanka.

Speaking to the *Observer* in his new office in Colombo, the Indian high commissioner, J.N. Dikshit, said that H.S. Puri, the Indian first secretary, met the Tamil Tigers' leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, in Jaffna between 19 and 26 July, 1987, and sounded him on the accord being negotiated between India and Sri Lanka.

Dikshit said the Tigers' leader agreed to accept the accord but, when flown to Delhi, he went back on this assurance. Later that month Prabhakaran met the Indian Prime Minister and, Dikshit said, the Tigers' leader again gave a verbal acceptance of the accord.

'He asked us for money and we agreed to give it to him. He said he needed funds for the maintenance of his cadres. The funds were paid in August after the signing of the accord.'

When asked if it was the Indian Prime Minister who had acceded to the request for money, Dikshit refused to say. Nor would he answer questions about the amount, the currency it was paid in, or the mode of payment.

When the *Observer* contacted the LTTE office in Madras by telephone last Friday, the Tigers were at first reluctant to say anything. 'It is secret. We had a gentlemen's agreement with the Indians,' a spokesman said.

When told that the Indian high commissioner had spoken to the *Observer*, the unidentified spokesman agreed to speak, adding that this was the first time the organization had spoken to a journalist about the secret deal.

The spokesman accepted that 'money had been talked about' claiming that the money was intended as 'war damages' but denied that any money had actually been paid. When asked what the amount agreed upon was, the spokesman said: 'I can't say on the phone. You come to Madras and we will talk to you.'

Later the spokesman said that the deal for a monthly payment of five million Indian rupees (around £215,000) had been struck between Prabhakaran and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi when the two met in New Delhi at the end of last July.

Gandhi had been insistent that the LTTE stop 'taxing' the people of Jaffna after the accord was signed. Prabhakaran, it appears, asked Gandhi for a payment in compensation and was offered five million Indian rupees a month, which he accepted.

Estimates of how much the LTTE raised in Jaffna from the taxes they imposed range from three million Sri Lankan rupees (1.4 million Indian rupees) a month upwards.

At another point the spokesman admitted that the first payment had been made, then seemed unsure. But he added he was certain that subsequent payments had not been made.

According to the Tigers' spokesman, the payment had been part of a larger package of guarantees that the Indian Prime Minister had offered Prabhakaran last July, in an attempt to secure his cooperation in implementing the Indo-Sri Lanka accord. These included:

(1) An assurance that the LTTE would form the majority of the Interim Provincial Council.

(2) One billion Indian rupees (around $43 million) economic assistance to be provided for rehabilitation of the Jaffna peninsula, which was too be undertaken by the LTTE-dominated Interim Provincial Council.

(3) Help to form a Tamil police force which was to be set up after the formation of the Interim Provincial Council.

According to the spokesman, the monthly payment of five million rupees was to support the families of Tiger cadres who had died or been injured.

The Sunday Observer
3 April, 1988

Can We Trust the Tigers?

The first thing we learn about the mess in Sri Lanka is that no enduring peace is possible without the Tigers. When I was last in Jaffna, the town commandant, Brig 'Risky' Kahlon, was very clear about this. He is in a very peculiar position: he controls the town in that nobody can stir without his permission. But, at the same time, he cannot *make* anybody stir: when the Tigers choose to stop a man from moving, the man stops moving. And 'Risky' Kahlon can do nothing about it. He is frank about this. 'I am here for a little while,' he says with a wise smile, 'but Prabhakaran is here for ever.'

If you don't believe Kahlon you have only to read what Maj Gen Sardeshpande had to say to the AFP reporter who met him at Palaly on 1 April. In a tape-recorded interview, Sardeshpande admitted that the LTTE were far from finished. Indeed, he did not know exactly what their strength was. The interview so embarrassed Delhi that pressure was put on the GOC Southern Command to get Sardeshpande to retract his words but the good army man that he is, Sardeshpande did no such thing.

So the question is not: should we do a deal with the Tigers? It is not a matter of deciding whether they are the best people to hand the peninsula over to. They are the *only* people we can hand the peninsula to. The question instead is: can we do a deal with the Tigers? Can we hand over the Jaffna peninsula and retreat to strategic positions like Elephant's Pass? Or are we stuck in the frontline for a long, long time?

I am writing this on 9 July and the position is, as ever, confused. A week ago we heard from Kittu: the headlines screamed that Kittu had announced that the LTTE and RAW had reached a 'broad understanding' on an arms surrender. The 'understanding' followed a presidential communique from J.R. Jayewardene to the effect that the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces would come through. In turn, the 'understanding' was to have been followed by a 'comprehensive agreement' between the LTTE and the Government of India.

Since then things have been getting curiouser and curiouser. Two days later Kittu tells the *Indian Express* that the Indian army operation has not been called off. Then we hear that Kittu himself has gone to Sri Lanka to speak to Prabhakaran. But Kittu or no Kittu, Prabhakaran maintains his silence.

A few days later we learn that Kittu has not been to see Prabhakaran, that it was another representative. Even so, not a word from Prabhakaran. And now, as I sat down to type this piece, I read an item on the ticker tape informing us that Prabhakaran has declined to meet any representative of the LTTE from Madras unless the IPKF calls a five-day ceasefire. So where do we stand?

I may be wrong about this but I do not believe that there is a solution to the Sri Lankan mess at hand. I say this knowing that I may be proven wrong even before this column appears in print. I say this because I have begun to share the great doubts the Indian government has about the reliability of the LTTE as a political organization. I do not believe we can trust the LTTE's word because the LTTE is not a mature enough organization that understands and respects the importance of contracts.

The record speaks for itself. The document reproduced here records the secret agreement reached at Palaly on 28 September last year. It bears the signatures of Mahattya and Hardip Puri. The letter on page fifty-seven—published for the first time here—records the decision of the central committee of the LTTE to accept J.N. Dikshit's plan for the interim administration. It is signed by none other than Prabhakaran.

These are no ordinary documents. They represent one of the most daring adventures in Indian diplomacy, an adventure that did not come off but which, if it had, would have secured the best possible deal for all sides concerned: the Tamils, the LTTE, the Sinhalese and the Indian government. The authors of this adventure were our man in Colombo, J.N. Dikshit, and his able assistant Hardip Puri. If they had pulled this off, they would have come to be regarded as the most astonishing men in the history of Indian diplomacy. Unfortunately they didn't—and the Jaffna war became inevitable.

It is my contention that the blame for this lies almost wholly with the Tigers. I am not alone in this view; I believe the *Hindu*—much misunderstood on its Sri Lanka policy—thinks almost exactly the same way. What is important is to work out *why* that adventure failed and it is to this question that I shall address this column.

One has just got to cast a quick eye down the agreement, marked secret, to see that it contains the best possible deal for the LTTE, a deal they will find impossible to get again. An Interim Administrative Council was to be set for the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Seven of its twelve members including the chief administrator were to be LTTE men or nominees of the LTTE. Jayewardene was to delegate executive powers to the administrator who would be responsible for law and order. All this was to be done within forty-eight hours of the signing of the agreed minutes. The minutes were signed on the evening of 28 March. So what went wrong?

It is important to study exactly what happened in these forty-eight hours to learn a lesson and bear it in mind whenever we deal with the LTTE or with any such organization.

Ask the LTTE and they blame Jayewardene. As accomplices in the crime, they cite the role of the Indians here, represented by Dikshit and Maj Gen Harkirat Singh. The two arguments they put forward go like this:

It was agreed that Jayewardene would choose a chief administrator from a list of three submitted by the LTTE. He deliberately chose Sivagananam—a Jaffna man—so that the Tamils of the Eastern Province would feel that any merger would allow the Tamils of the Northern Province to dominate them.

The Sri Lankan authorities ordered that the seventeen Tigers, including Pulindran and Kumarappa, held by the Sri Lankan navy on 3 October, be sent to Colombo. Maj Gen Harkirat Singh did not do enough to 'save' them, so they committed suicide by swallowing cyanide pills on 5 October. On 7 October, a rampage followed, in which 160 Sinhalese were massacred, mainly in eastern Trincomalee and Batticaloa. The Indian Army then decided to get tough and the war of Jaffna followed as a direct consequence.

Since most people do not keep track of who exactly wanted what and when, there is a great deal of confusion and many have come to believe that the LTTE has a case. It is therefore important to carefully retrace the movements in this fast changing situation. To this end I have spoken to quite a few of the protagonists in the drama, in particular I was fortunate to meet Sivagnanam himself at his home, when I last visited Jaffna, and his account makes some things very clear.

At 4.15 p.m. on the 29th Mahattya called on Sivagnanam. They discussed the agreement of the previous day for approximately an hour. Immediately after this meeting, at which Mahattya communicated the main points of the deal, Sivagnanam asked who was going to be chief administrator. Mahattya said it was going to be Sivagnanam. At 6.30 p.m. on the Rupavahini news, the Sri Lankan government announced the formation and composition of the Interim Administrative Council.

At 10 p.m. Mahattya and Yogi met Sivagnanam again. They felt they had been betrayed by Jayewardene. How? Apparently, it had been agreed that there would be four LTTE men from the east, and three from the north. However, this informal agreement between the LTTE and the Indians had been ignored by the President. So not only was the balance five from the north and two from the east but there was no representation from Batticaloa in the LTTE contingent. Romesh and Kashianandan—the two LTTE men who should have represented Batticaloa—had been replaced by Sridharan and Ravi. (The other two Eastern Province men—Roopan from Trincomalee and Adam Lebbe from Kalmunai—had been included as per the informal agreement.)

Now, instead of straightaway tackling this matter with Dikshit, Mahattya and Yogi—the other two council members from the Northern Province—sounded bitter. It was decided that Sivagnanam should step down to enable Padmanadhan (an Eastern Province man) to become chief administrator. Sivagnanam complied. The LTTE claimed that Sivagnanam had refused to accept the post, while the Jaffna papers wrote that he was not in a position to accept it. In a sense, both were right.

Around midnight, Mahattya telephoned Dikshit in Colombo and communicated their demands, both old and new. Dikshit said he would meet Jayewardene the next morning and see what could be done.

The next morning Dikshit met him. The Sri Lankan President agreed to replace Sridharan and Ravi with any other two Batticaloa men. (Romesh and Sivanandasunderam were chosen thus giving rise to a widely-believed rumour that Kashianandan had been excluded because he was known to be 'anti-Indian'. But that is another matter.)

As for the post of the chief administrator, the President refused to appoint Padmanadhan but sought to allay fears that he was playing, a divisive game between Northern and Eastern Provinces' Tamils, by suggesting that the LTTE make a new list of three, consisting entirely of Eastern Province men from which he would select one, as per the agreement. (It was officially put out that Jayewardene did not think Padmanadhan up to the job, as he had merely been a sub-divisional magistrate. Sivagnanam, in contrast, had served as a municipal commissioner since 1975. The truth, however, was that he suspected Padmanadhan of helping convicts in a famous jailbreak case.)

The LTTE became adamant about Padmanadhan. As a result, talks floundered. On 1 October itself, Delhi 'flayed' the LTTE's shifting stand. On 2 October an Indian soldier, *sepahi* Gorakh Ram, was killed in eastern Trincomalee when some people in a van opened fire on a stationary IPKF picket. By 4 October India was livid and the government spokesman in Delhi told reporters that the LTTE had gone back on its promises. He said that the entire conversation between Prabhakaran and Dikshit had been taped and, 'if need be could be made public'. On the same day, Prabhakaran accused the Indians of betraying the Tamils. And Jayewardene? He threatened to pull back the IPKF.

We must remember that all this happened *before* 5 October, when twelve of the seventeen Tigers in the custody of the Sri Lankan navy popped their cyanide pills. What followed—the carnage in the Eastern Province and the consequent war of Jaffna—is history.

Why the breakdown? Till my last visit to Jaffna, I felt convinced that the LTTE leadership had been faced by a rebellion among the ranks on 28 October. After all, guerrillas do not easily give up their weapons. But after travelling there and meeting several of the concerned people I have come to accept the principal objection to this hypothesis, that the LTTE is a well-disciplined, leader-dominated party, in which Prabhakaran's word is law.

The only other reason I can find for this amateur backtracking which cost the LTTE a great many lives, is their inexperience, their inability to understand that there are some things you just cannot go back on. It is a view that is shared by many observers of the Sri Lankan scene, even if few come out quite so bluntly in their expert commentaries. I would be a happy man if the Government of India could work out an enduring peace with the Tigers but somehow—going by past experience—I can see all kinds of unnecessary problems raising their heads.

Sunday
17–23 July, 1988

With the One Who Won

When wizened analysts tell you the Pakistani elections have resulted in a deadlock, don't believe them.

One party has clearly won—and it's neither the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), nor the Islamic Democratic Alliance (IDA). It is a party that commands the allegiance of the majority of the Pakistani elite yet strangely enough there has not been a word about it in all the election coverage—in Pakistan or abroad.

Despite its wide support and venerable ancestry the JJUN has been completely overlooked by commentators: just how grave an error this has been became apparent as soon as the election results began rolling in during the early hours of 17 November. For there are few people in Pakistan who matter who are not fully paid up members of *Jidda Jitte Udde Naal:* in English, With the One Who Wins (WOWW).

It is by no means a new party. A decade ago Malik Syed Hasan, a lawyer at the Lahore high court, gave it this name and abbreviation but the party has existed for much longer. It is an existence accepted by all other parties, however grudgingly. 'All countries have a JJUN,' a leading member of the PPP said to me in remonstrance, only to admit, 'but Pakistan has a larger JJUN than most.'

Ten years of martial law with all its attendant cynicism have only served to swell the ranks of the JJUN. Especially in the Punjab, the largest province by far, the voters appeared sullen, hardly celebrating the 'return' of democracy the way the foreign press had been.

One could hardly blame the voter. For by the time Pakistan went to the polls there was little to choose from between the two major parties, little, that is, by way of policy. Perhaps influenced by the Americans, Benazir had successfully rolled away most of her socialism. As for the programme to import Islamic laws whatever has been done cannot be undone: it will be politically impossible for Ms Bhutto to repeal the famous Hudood Ordinance though it is unlikely that punishments awarded under the Ordinance will be carried out. (But then, even under Gen Zia, it must be remembered that none of the Islamic punishments such as stoning and amputation were actually meted; they were merely awarded.) As for Pakistan's relationship with India, Ms Bhutto—if she should become Prime Minister—will discover what are politely known as the 'compulsions' of the situation and despite the pundit's predictions there will be as much tension with India as there has been during the Zia years. As for the Afghan policy Ms Bhutto has said she will stick by the Geneva accord while the IDA have called for a full fledged *jehad*. It is unlikely either will be able to deliver what they promise. The Americans will continue to supply the Mujahideen with arms on Pakistani territory to carry out a struggle which is not permitted by the Geneva accord; equally, the IDA will not be able to involve Pakistan directly in any such *jehad*. The only difference that one can discern between the two parties is in their attitude to provincial autonomy, the PPP is committed to consitutional reforms that will introduce a measure of provincial autonomy—as are the Baluchistan National Alliance, the Jamiat e Ulema Islami (Fazlur Rehman), the MQM and Wali Khan's, Awami National party. The only problem with these reforms is that they require a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly—and these parties do not possess such a majority.

A week before the elections in Lahore I met a prominent industrialist who had tried to pay both parties' election funds. Unfortunately for this JJUN, the PPP had not accepted his money so he really had to bank on th IDA people. He told me he had paid the Jamiat a huge sum. In return he said he had been assured that they would not allow the PPP to take over. The plan—he assured me—was that up to fifteen seats in the Punjab would be rigged in favour of the IDA. If Ms Bhutto was going to achieve a bare majority—say 104 or 105 of the 207 Muslim seats—then she could be stopped by rigging these fifteen seats. The President would delay calling her to form a government; in the meantime it was hoped that the JJUNs in her party would defect to Mian Nawaz Sharif and enable him to form a government. But even the industrialist conceded that if Benazir was going to sweep the polls—say 120 seats—it would be impossible to keep her out.

On the night of the sixteenth I dined with this industrialist. Together, we heard the election results come in. As soon as Benazir's sweep of the rural Sindhi seats had been established he began declaring that the PPP had swept the polls. 'See, I told you,' he said to one and all, 'Benazir has swept the polls.' He was in a peculiarly vulnerable state of excitement.

In the event Benazir did not sweep the polls: Punjab let her down. Most people had given her sixty per cent of the Punjabi seats: she got forty-five per cent. What happened? There are two explanations. Salman Taseer, Bhutto's biographer and one time confidante of Ms Bhutto, was distraught when I met him on the morning of the seventeenth. 'Punjab has given me a shock' he kept repeating. When asked to explain the PPP's poor showing here he said: 'There's been a lot of affluence here in the past eleven years. A petty bourgeois class of shopkeepers has developed in the Punjab; they are reactionary. It proves to me that Punjabis are not concerned with important large issues like what sort of foreign policy will Pakistan have. They will vote for someone who will fix their roads, their *gallis*. It's a very narrow self-interest.'

The other explanation came from Aitzaz Ahsan, Benazir Bhutto's lawyer who will almost certainly become her law minister should she form government. He alleged rigging. 'They are systematically doctoring the results in favour of the IDA,' he said when I spoke to him around noon on the seventeenth. 'Why else are they witholding the results of so many Punjab seats? And why are so many Punjab seats suddenly going to the IDA this morning? Counting from remote constituencies in the Frontier and Baluchistan was completed last night. Why is Punjab taking so long?' Unfortunately Ahsan and the rest of the PPP people have not been able to come up with much evidence to back their charges. But the suspicion lingers.

Hints and guesses, hints and guesses. Nobody—not even the JJUNs—knew exactly what was going to happen in these elections. So every piece of news could be read both ways. In Islamabad a senior bureaucrat gave me a startling piece of information. He said that Gen Mirza Aslam Beg, the chief of staff, had contacted a senior bureaucrat on 1 November and asked him to set up a secret meeting with Benazir. When the bureaucrat asked Gen Beg what he wished to discuss with Ms Bhutto at this secret meeting, Gen Beg said that he wanted to reassure the PPP leader that there would be no impediment to her forming a ministry should she win a majority. In return he sought two assurances from Ms Bhutto.

> (1) That the defence budget would not be cut.
> (2) That the defence and foreign ministers would not be appointed without their names being first approved by the army.

The bureaucrat sent a message to Ms Bhutto in Karachi through an intermediary. Then on 6 November Gen Beg met him again and told him to call off the proposed meeting as there would be no need for it. The way I was told the story I was supposed to believe that there had been a change of plan at the top level between 1 November and 6 November and that the people at the top no longer intended to allow Benazir to take over. But there was another possibility; that Gen Beg had got through to Ms Bhutto through some other channel and had already obtained the assurances he had sought from her.

Right till the end it was not clear whose side the President and the chief of army staff were on. Would they allow a free poll or would they fix things in favour of the IDA? Certainly there had been a measure of gerrymandering when the delimitation of constituencies had taken place, all in favour of the ruling parties. Then a supreme court that had distinguished itself as remarkably free in recent months had gone into a funk and announced that they were not going to give a judgement on the famous I.D. card case before the elections. In effect the three presidential ordinances which required voters to produce their identity cards before receiving their ballot papers would stand. On the face of it there is nothing wrong in this requirement; indeed it is a requirement of the National Registration Act 1973, a piece of legislation put on the statute book by the last PPP government. But in practice this would disqualify a vast proportion of the population from voting, particularly women and the poor, two traditional PPP constituencies.

The extent to which the I.D. card issue affected the election can be gauged by one revealing statistic. In the course of his arguments the attorney general of Pakistan had submitted that ninety-two per cent of the registered voters had been issued with I.D. cards. The chief justice of the Lahore high court directed the registration office to conduct a sample survey by going through a series of numbers on the electoral rolls in any ward of a particular Lahore constituency and checking how many of these voters possessed I.D. cards. Of the 550 men polled only 282 possessed I.D. cards.

Obviously a great many bureaucrats threw in their lot behind the ruling governments. In the Frontier, acting chief minister Fazle Haq used government helicopters for electioneering—in brazen defiance of the chief election commissioner's orders. Fazle Haq wasn't the only one to defy the CEC thus, it is just that he was the most blatant. At a public meeting in his constituency in Mardaan he went so far as to announce that he was defying the CEC—and that no one was going to do anything about it.

The acting chief minister of Punjab, Mian Nawaz Sharif, used government helicopters to spray both the PPP and the IDA rallies with photographs of Nusrat Bhutto dancing with Gerald Ford. [Beneath, on stage, the mullahs ranted on. *Indira Gandhi ek kaafir theen. Hindustan ki kaafir theen. Magar jab Amreeka ke sadar ne unse naachna chaha to unhone saaf inkar kar diya. Par yeh Nusrat Bhutto, zaleel aurat, mus-*

salmaan hote hue, ek kaafir se naacheen. (Indira Gandhi was a kafir, a kafir of India. Even so when the American President wanted to dance with her she refused. But this Nusrat Bhutto, this low-down woman, even though she is a Muslim, she dances with a kafir.)] The D.C. of Lahore was present at this particular IDA *jalsa* on the last day of campaigning, his eye on his watch as he had been given instructions by Justice Nusrat, the CEC, to see if the *jalsa* extended the prescribed time for campaigning by even one minute. Apparently Justice Nusrat had said that he would disqualify the IDA people if they erred thus. (They didn't.)

The men in charge of state-controlled Pakistan TV began hedging their bets a month before the elections when all of a sudden viewers became aware of the existence of a young lady called Benazir Bhutto whose name had not figured on the screens for eleven years. One day, a fortnight before the elections, there was even a glimpse of a PPP rally addressed by Ms Bhutto. It was, of course, promptly followed by two-and-a-half minutes of Nawaz Sharif's *jalsa*.

Apart from this, PTV tried to educate the voter as to the importance of the elections. Political scientists Hamid Qizilvash appeared in a number of shorts on morning transmission explaining what a vote is and why it should be cast after due thought.

The Hindustan Times
27 November, 1988
(Posthumously published)

The Conservative as Art Critic

Iconoclasm was second nature to Dhiren Bhagat, making him a devastating critic. But he was always fair.

Who's Afraid of Salman Rushdie?

There have been occasions on which even limping crows have been known to rise for me, rise erect and, clicking their afflicted webs on hot macadam, salute my presence before reuniting themselves with all the black that infests the blue. My mother, for she is keen on honour, remembers several such occasions; my father, partial to glory, remembers the rest. As for myself—well, I have embarked on that tricky course of effacement that every Hindu must someday begin to negotiate, and anyway, modesty tempers memory.

But I remember last week. The National Akademi had decided to attach the weight of one of their awards to my reputation, faint and quivering as it was then; and I had, after an initial reluctance, a most proper reluctance, for a faint reputation must be protected from many of the pressures the world designs for it, decided to accept.

But sorrows come not as single spies etc., and who can be delighted at having to sit through four hundred and eighteen felicitations and an equally large—I forget the figure—number of awards? Throughout, the President of the Akademi, a wiry, enthusiastic author from the South who made one recall Maugham's observation that only a mediocre man is always at his best, chirped indefatigably. I may be young but I have followed the wandering farts of minor authors. for long enough to be able to dismiss him on the evidence of my nose alone. I dozed, gently, restraining snores.

I was woken when my turn came. Then, for the next three minutes, I was garlanded, feted, photographed, awarded and made the object of several other verbs of commendation. But the routines of praise and applause had long ago inured this audience of tired awardees. They rose, but even this lacked conviction.

Afterwards, at the struggle that passed for tea, I met the President. I was busy biting into yet another *aloo bhajiya* when he introduced himself. No thank you, he wrote in Malayalam and didn't eat *bhajiyas*. Once he too had written in English. When Nirad Chaudhuri had declared that people who ate *bhajiyas* couldn't possible write good English he had given up *bhajiyas*. Two years later he had given up English. But he felt the Chaudhuri argument could logically be extended to Malayalam as well, northern *bhajiyas* as alien to its Dravidian rhythms. . .

I remember remarking it seemed a good year for literature—or had they forgotten to give awards last year? He lowered his tone with the adeptness of a man who enjoyed sharing what should, more properly, stay unshared.

'Orders,' he whispered, smiling. 'Orders.'

They were normally very sparing with awards and felicitations. But hadn't I heard of that Indian author who had received a literary award in Britain recently? And all the consequent fuss? Well, it was about in Delhi that a question would be asked during the next session: What had we done to encourage our authors? Hadn't we learnt anything from the Hargobind Khurana episode? Why were foreigners responsible for the success of our intellectuals? etc. The ministry was extremely upset about this. So the Akademi had received orders.

'But that is what, everybody says', he concluded, 'But I say no. It is not the ministry. Too-ey.'

'Touché?' I asked, having missed the point. 'Touché who?'

'No, no, no, Not touché. 2A.'

I have been to two numerologists but am still baffled by the peculiar potency of that magic number. When next in Delhi I shall ask around. It doesn't seem to matter though. Dust accumulates on the keys of several Remingtons as another thousand odd faint reputations are busy balancing their newly acquired burdens. And my mother, curiously, is displeased with the Akademi for increasing her mental baggage at a time when she was lightening her load.

At end of the aptly named Caucus Race did not the Dodo say: 'Everybody has won, and all must have prizes'? Who's afraid of Salman Rushdie? Judging from the number felicitated last week, who indeed?

The Sunday Observer
7 March, 1982

The Parrot's Beak

For over four hundred years, villagers in Maharashtra have enjoyed *tamashas*. But the city is never far behind with its mutations. Last year, Dilip Chitre, perhaps the most idiosyncratic and iconoclastic figure in Marathi letters today, raided the traditional folk form to write an experimental play. Satyadev Dubey, that ageing *enfant terrible* of the Bombay state is busy working on the production, *Mithoo Mithoo Popat*, which opens in Bombay sometime in August.

The title recalls the nursery rhyme:

Mithoo mithoo popat
Ahe mota chavat
Khato Kairi kachi
Malach manhto luchi

It seems an innocuous enough rhyme, something young girls are taught to sing long before they could possibly know what it means (Sweet sweet parrot/Is such a rogue/Eats my raw mango/Calls me cunning.) Innocuous enough, till one learns that *popat* is colloquial for penis and marvellous ambiguities are implicit in the raw mango. 'It's really a familiar enough situation,' explains Chitre, '*Popat* is to the little girls what the spider was to Miss Muffet.'

Not quite a *tamasha*, and that's the point. Subtitled *ek tamasha vaza khel* (a *tamasha*-like play, and the pun is on play, *khel*) *Mithoo Mithoo Popat* first appeared in last Diwali's issue of *Abhiruchi*, a leading Marathi literary magazine, and won immediate praise.

The curtain rises to reveal six girls in six cages, and a man with an enormous grotesque red beak. Six swift seductions follow, one in each scene, each ending in Popat taking a girl behind the screen. And after each encounter he returns, a little more flabbergasted than before, each time carrying a little burden of domestication, now a *jharoo*, now a newspaper.

The play begins with the traditional *naman*, the invocation to Ganesh, in which Chitre implores the Lord to digest in his potbelly the sins of the playwrights, from Kirloskar to Tendulkar. Having set the tone of urbane hilarity, Chitre works his way through a range of musical forms: mock *bhajans*, *laonis*, *mantras*, *baul geet*, *taranas* and even a *kaida*.

Tamasha goes back at least to the seventeenth century, when it acquired its present form, a combination of *laoni* and dance skits interspersed with mimicry. The oldest stories about *tamasha* that circulate are chauvinistic accounts of how visiting troupes entertaining in Mughal camps in the Deccan did reconnaissance for Shivaji.

Tamasha is of two sorts: *sangeet phad* and *dholki phad*. The former is *lok natya* which has come to rest in the cities and which today means no more than some bad improvised *kathak* by tired painted dancers, more often than not singing indifferent Hindi film songs and the occasional *laoni*. It can be seen any night of the week, in Bombay at the Hanuman theatre at Lalbaug, or in Pune at the Aryabhushan Tamasha Theatre, where regulars congregate to while away their evenings. The performance takes place on a raised proscenium stage: men from the audience come forward to pay their favourites a rupee at a time. Occasionally the scene comes to life, for banter is not unfamiliar here, but on the whole the atmosphere is one of sad and seedy romance, not art.

It is a slow decline, but obvious for all that. Various factors have conspired against *tamasha*. In 1954 Morarji Desai, as chief minister of Bombay state, imposed a ban on *tamasha* as it was *ashleel*. Representations were made, and a compromise effected. The Tamasha Board was set up, and all troupes were to submit their scripts for approval. Yesterday's Tamasha Board is today's Scrutiny Board, and now all plays put up in Maharashtra are subject to its censorship. This can hardly console the practitioners of *tamasha*. Such constraints can have radical consequences for an essentially extempore art. Of course the players still improvise, but the tyranny of a script is something they now have to cope with, even if only by ignoring it.

What the censor could not do, cinema has done. Ever since Dada Kondke took Dada Indorikar's *Shiksha* on to celluloid, *tamasha* routines have become obligatory in Marathi cinema. In Pune, Kishan Kusgaonkar, now past seventy, and once actor Nilu Phule's guru, deplored this development too. Cinema attendance has affected interest in *tamasha*. And the curious result of all this has been that now audiences demand that the original artistes perform the stylized mutant cinema has created.

Chitre is by no means the first to have taken *tamasha* to the stage. In the early fifties P.L. Deshpande employed *tamasha* conventions in plays like *Pudhari Paije* put up by the Seva Dal, and even earlier, the anti-Brahminical *Satya Shodhak Samaj* and the communists had tried using *tamasha* for their own didactic purposes. In 1956 Vyankatesh Madgulkar wrote *Bin Biaacha Jhar* which was a success. Over the years he has followed it up with *Kunacha Kunala Mel Nahin* (1958) and *Pati Gele Ga Kathewadi* (1974). He wrote *Sangti Aika* for Anant Mane using *tamasha*, and it was the longest running Marathi film ever. His plots are simple, often based on *laonis*. 'I was born in a village and in all my writing I have tried to give a feeling of what it was like to have been brought up in a village.' Madgulkar works at the AIR Station, Pune, as a producer. 'A lot of us found *tamasha* unsatisfactory for modern audiences because it was too amorphous, and it had no message. But it was an excellent form, so we worked on it. Of late though, there have been too many people producing a slick,sophisticated *tamasha* for the stage—Vasant Sabnis for instance. Even on a city stage, *tamasha* should not lose its vitality,' he says. What does he think of Chitre's play? 'Dilip is a genius; in *Mithoo* he has used *tamasha* to say things, about sexuality for instance, that have not been said before, at least not in this form. But its success will depend on how it is performed.'

Chitre has moved from the political to the personal, but his principal departure has been from the traditional. *Mithoo* is a *tamasha vaza khel*, no more. Its text has a richness that rewards ample study. 'I have been reading it now for four months,' says Satyadev Dubey, 'and each time I find new meanings hidden in it.' At the end of Chitre's play Popat lies in a heap, fatigued and emasculated by his misadventures. A six-foot tall Amazon in a nine-yard sari comes to remove Popat's beak, henceforth to be an object of veneration.

Ardha marda poorna sarda (machismo halved, wholly frigid), the Amazon and her acolytes dance around the supine Popat, chanting. Chitre's eyes gleam as he recites the chorus in his flat in Sahitya Sahawas, the writers' colony in Bandra. It was inevitable that Popat lose his beak, the *tamasha* lose its innocence and move from a traditional folk art to stylized cinema and finally to the complexities of experimental theatre. But what loss it sustains is our gain.

India Today
30 June, 1982

The Limited Club

Ezekiel, Mahapatra, Ramanujan, Parthasarathy, Kolatkar, Nandy, Daruwalla, Patel, Jussawalla, Mehrotra, Lal, Das, Kumar. A baker's dozen. Add or subtract a couple of names and you have Indian poetry in English in a sentence. There have been smaller clubs.

Membership has its problems. Publication is an obvious one. This year the Sahitya Akademi gave its annual award for English to Jayanta Mahapatra's *Relationship*. Mahapatra is arguably our finest poet in English and this he feels in his most significant work to date. *Relationship* was first published in New York in 1980 but despite the award Mahapatra was finally forced to publish its first Indian edition himself from Cuttack. In 1958 the Writers Workshop (W.W.) was formed in Calcutta by P. Lal and some friends to counter such problems. In its first fifteen years it published almost every good poet then writing—and many besides. But it has fallen a victim of its own relentless logic. Committed to publishing *en masse* it has so far published 298 titles of original poetry in English thereby losing any reputation it might have had as a publisher whose standard had any value. (Many feel the last significant volume W.W. published was Daruwalla's *Apparition in April* in 1971; Lal, predictably, disagrees.) After that 1976 was a good year: Oxford University Press in Delhi entered the fray by bringing out five excellent volumes and as if in response a Bombay cooperative, Clearing House, published another four of an equally high standard. Since then Clearing House has brought out a couple more and another Bombay cooperative, Newground, has published four volumes. Small though it is, the club has more to offer but publishers are curiously recalcitrant.

There are less tangible problems that are more crucial. Indians have been writing poetry in English for more than 150 years. In 1828 Samuel Smith brought out Henry Derozio's *The Fakeer of Jungheera* in Calcutta and reading it today one feels that finding a publisher must have been one of its less important problems. Not just Derozio but a chain of verse-mongers—Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, Toru Dutt, Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya—produced an anaemic poetry because of a total failure to innovate and mould the English language to native ends. Without a thought they slipped into a borrowed rhetoric which seriously impaired their ability to describe the world they knew and adopt plausible postures within it. At the same time English verse often vigorous in its own context, became hopelessly effete when written in the pale ink of its Indian imitators.

The year 1953 signalled a change. Nissim Ezekiel privately published *A Time To Change* that year and its title announced its message. For the first time an Indian poet writing in English had consciously forsaken the easy elegance of the English tradition and had resolved to look with as honest an eye as he could summon at his world, limited as it might be to the environs of his body and self. Modern Indian English poetry began then.

It could not have been easy, being so vigorously honest and focussing so intently on the accessible alone. Much that was superficially attractive had to be resisted:

> I have learnt to revel in the stone
> Hard, cold, heavy, shapeless, solid stone
> To turn away from all that seems to flow
> Elusively; time, water, blood around the bone;

That was written in the early fifties. Since then Ezekiel has, with good reason, been less careful at times. In the early seventies he wrote a batch of poems in the clumsy English syntax of a Gujarati-speaking Bombaywalla. These were published in the *Illustrated Weekly* and won him an instant public. But they had limited value: they notably failed to transcend the condition of caricature and Ezekiel wisely realized this.

Others have from time to time taken up that enterprise of cross-fertilizing English with native languages. Though Pritish Nandy claims Bengali and Urdu influences, it is the bilingual poets Ramanujan (Kannada), Kolatkar (Marathi) and Parthasarathy (Tamil), whose work contains results of the experiment. In what was clearly designed to be a seminal essay *Whoring After English Gods* (1967) Parthasarathy observing that making poems was like making love, announced that his affair with English was over and that he was now settling down with Tamil. His bilingualism he said was unenviable but he was going to exploit it. Today fifteen years later his Tamil poems have something of the English in them and his English something of his Tamil. As a strategy it sounds attractive but whether it will come to anything is still early to say. Likewise Kolatkar's *Jejuri* (1976) brought to English the impress of Marathi *bhakti* poets: time will tell how much this is worth.

Exploiting one's disadvantages is a capital way of succeeding. American poets in this century are a case in point. Berryman, Lowell, Roethke, Plath: eschewing the portly tradition of English verse and perpetually at odds with the philistine community that spawned them they lived precarious, often disastrous, lives (frequently ending in drink and suicide) but produced enduring poetry from the very themes of isolation and loneliness. Jussawalla's *A Missing Person* (1976) tried to explore such themes. Moving from a study of the individual to a study of his isolation, Jussawalla exploited his disadvantages thereby producing a poetic testament of the cultural bastard caught between the literary traditions of two worlds.

The individual strategies differ but the problems they are designed to contend with remain the same. And they are unlikely to change. When finally the muses' club acquires its clubhouse they would do well to frame over the mantelpiece a wonderfully ironic verse from Daruwalla's poem *Dialogues With a Third Voice* in which Daruwalla's alter ego sets out these problems with a rare clarity:

> Three dimensions of space, one of time,
> dreams, memories, senses—your meagre
> tools and a tradition that is portly.
> Can you fashion reality with these tools?

India Today
31 July, 1982

A Shot in the Arm

Two recent productions on Bombay's English stage could well change the face of theatre in India. Given the state of English theatre here nothing could be more welcome. Sylvester DaCunha's production of Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* (translated into English by Priya Adarkar) and Gieve Patel's *Savaksa* pursue different strategies but their achievement is similar, that of rooting Indian English theatre in a local world.

In 1951 the quixotic Nirad Chaudhuri had observed in his celebrated autobiography: 'While an educated Indian of these days speaks in private, and naturally, only in a mixed language, he is not as yet permitted to write it. No Indo-English equivalent of the Indo-Persian Urdu has as yet made its appearance as a written language, although we may expect its emergence.' As Chaudhuri had pointed out, bilingual literature is not something new to us. Hindustani is as bilingual as they come and as far back as the last century the Urdu poet Insha has written *Rani Ketaki Ki Kahani* with the aim of demonstrating that good prose could be written in chaste Hindustani, without using a single Persian or Sanskrit word. Even in the theatre colloquial bilingualism is nothing new. 'There is no such thing as purity of language in our theatre,' says Tendulkar. 'Our historical dramas in Marathi have the Muslims speaking in Urdu and Farsi. That is only natural. The audience will not accept anything else.'

DaCunha's production of *Kamala* has taken this bilingualism a stage further by tackling the way middle class Indians combine English with another language. DaCunha's is not a stray achievement but the culmination of a series of attempts in this direction. In May 1969 Alyque Padamsee chaired a ten-day workshop in Bombay consisting of playwrights like DaCunha, Dina Mehta and Nissim Ezekiel and actors such as Pearl Padamsee and Kabir Bedi in an attempt to try and evolve English plays for an Indian stage. Nothing came of the venture. Ezekiel had already written his *Nalini*. Dina Mehta some years later won a BBC award for one of her plays but it had little impact in India. DaCunha continued to experiment with local *ghati* accents in two revues, *I Love Bombay* and *It's Not Funny*, but they only generated the wrong sort of laughter.

Kamala is an examination of the moral issues raised by investigative journalism, and as such a topical enough play to attract the slick English audience. And its range of characters—Delhi-based journalists, Maharashtrian visiting uncle and servant, and a woman bought in Bihar by a journalist—afforded DaCunha the opportunity for linguistic diversity. Even in Tendulkar's original version three languages had been used—Punjabi, Marathi and Hindi—and the combination had worked. So DaCunha got Priya Adarkar to translate Tendulkar's script into plain grammatical English. (Except for conversations with the servant and the Bihari Kamala who only spoke Marathi and Hindi respectively.) Next, he picked a cast of professionals from the Marathi stage who could be relied upon to bring their own linguistic oddities to the plain text. In their hands the script changed radically. Syntactic inversions crept in ('What Kamala is going to do here?' 'When he is coming home?'). So did interjections and exclamations in Marathi ('*Pann*, did you have to buy a woman?' '*Jaoo dya ho*. Every time he meets me at a play or a reception he asks about you.' 'But you did, didn't you? *Bas zaale*.').

DaCunha's is an excellent production. This is partly because the standard of the professional cast—which includes the veteran Atmaram Bhende and stars like Vinay Apte and Sushas Joshi—is miles beyond that of the amateurs who usually clutter the English stage. But more importantly it is because the integration of several languages and the realism the local accents provide are so successful.

Playwright Gieve Patel pursues a different strategy in *Savaksa*. He is not interested in precisely reproducing the manner in which the middle class speaks, but in fashioning a language of his own using only English words but which is capable of expressing the fears and motives of his characters. In a prepared statement he says: 'Very early on I rejected the idea of using Indian pidgin—I'm not interested in the errors made by some of my countrymen while using English. I'm interested in evoking maximally the expressiveness of their thought. For this reason I started to remould English, distorting its syntax and grammar, mauling it up, and attempted to bring it back to a new level of normalcy.'

It is a questionable strategy, though it must be admitted that the sheer novelty of *Kamala*'s language is responsible for some of its success and that does not please DaCunha. 'On the first night,' he confesses, 'we got all the wrong laughs. People were embarrassed to hear that kind of English—particularly the accents—and their embarrassment came out in their laughter.' But this novelty of 'mistakes' will soon wear off if such theatre comes to stay.

The basic strategy apart, *Savaksa* is the better play, quite possibly the first great English play to be written by an Indian. There is no simple moral debate in progress here, but a careful representation of conflicting forces and the checks they exercise on each other. In his first play *Princess* (1970), Patel had examined notions of possession; in *Savaksa* he turns his attention, with greater success, to domination.

Though Patel is 'on the whole' satisfied with Pearl Padamsee's production, it does come as a disappointment after such a magnificent script. Roger Pereira who plays the title role, that of a Parsi landlord in Gujarat, sounds like Roger Pereira declaiming Shakespeare, not a Parsi landlord raging as he watches his emotional territory dwindle. But a play of such magnitude cannot be forgotten and *Savaksa* is bound to be revived soon. English theatre in India has received a vital shot in the arm this year.

India Today
15 December, 1982

Does the Government Have a Sense of History?

It's difficult to say. As a people certainly we have a poor sense of history and we çannot be flailed too often for that failing. Naipaul tells of the educated engineer who points at a Mughal ruin in Kashmir insisting it is 5000 years old. In this column I am not interested in this lacuna in the Indian mind though no doubt our dim notion of the past is in part responsible for the government's peculiar sense of history. For what is the government but a whole load of people?

But there's more to it than that. Consider the recent row over the history textbooks in Maharashtra. Two chapters in the Standard VIII textbook prescribed by the State Board of Secondary Education invited the attention of some irate religious groups. Their anger was understandable: the chapters, *The Rise of Christianity* and *The Rise of Islam* contained several inaccuracies. The Archbishop of Bombay and the Jamaat-e-Islami joined the protest. Eventually at the chief minister's instance, the offending chapters were dropped. But beyond the facts the textbooks got wrong a more serious matter, that of interpretation and selection, lies unsolved.

Only the naïve believe that history is all facts. Rather, it is mostly interpretation. Since total human history (the minute by minute account of every individual that ever lived) is a ridiculously impossible enterprise wholly without interest, the business of the historian is to select from the material he has before him those facts which he considers relevant or significant and present them accordingly.

This raises several questions. What is to be the basis of this selection? How should a fact be presented when alternative accounts of it are available i.e. which perspective should the historian adopt? And, more generally, in a secular country such as ours which contains many religions and many more peoples, whose history is it to be? [Last year the section on Muslim rule before the Mughals was titled *Sabhi ne Loot Maar Kiya.* (All of Them Plundered and Killed.)]

Possessing a sense of history is not just a matter of knowing what happened when, it is equally a matter of having coherent answers to questions such as these. But it is precisely these questions that the government wishes to sweep under the carpet, instead simultaneously presenting the trivialities of a glorious, hoary past and an uncontroversial, secular, harmonious present.

I speak from experience. Sixteen months ago I was commissioned to write a longish brochure on the Railways' historical extravaganza, the much talked about *Palace on Wheels*. I made two trips to the Ajmer workshop, inspected the train, and took it out to Beawar for a ride once. It was a tacky mess, it rattled like nobody's business, it was garish and nouveau beyond belief. Where the royal saloons were light and airy, the *Palace* was airconditioned and claustrophobic; where the Maharajas' rakes were never more than four carriages, the *Palace* was long and bulky, eighteen carriages in all. The bar and lounge were fitted with Godrej swivel seats upholstered in black rexine (yes, *rexine*), 'antique' fittings bought on tender from Chandni Chowk cluttered the interior.

When I visited the Railway Museum and saw their excellent collection of glass negatives I was told that no one had consulted them before 'designing' the train. I communicated my dismay to the officials who had commissioned me. They weren't pleased. If I couldn't enthuse about the train, perhaps I had better talk about Rajasthan and its charms, about the Princely States, about history.

History! When I presented my script a few weeks later all sorts of objections were raised at Rail Bhavan but despite my repeated requests that these be put on paper no one was willing to do so. Hear the objections and you will understand why.

'Delete all references to Sardar Patel' I was told. When I asked why, I was told he was a 'political figure'. I suggested he was a 'historical figure'. A discussion ensued on this fine point. 'But you must delete all reference to Gandhiji.' (I had introduced Patel thus: 'Back in the Twenties, moved by the Mahatma, a rather astute lawyer renounced his prosperous practice. . . ') Gandhi, I was told, was a 'controversial figure'.

But the nonsense didn't end there. 'Feudalism', I had written, 'may have been unjust, but it was certainly colourful.' That invited the strongest objection, 'Are you suggesting that a period of Indian history was unjust?' I tried to tell the officials that this was, or rather should be, pretty much the government's line, that this was a socialist government after all. But they were adamant. 'Do you realize this is a government publication and a question could be asked in Parliament about such irresponsible remarks?' I suggested that I wrote instead: 'Feudalism may have been just, but it was certainly colourful.' Half an hour later we settled for: 'Whatever else it may have been, feudalism was certainly colourful.'

It's not just the government that has this attitude of the ostrich when it comes to unpalatable facts. What angered the divines in the textbook case was not just the facts it got wrong or the interpretation; but also the facts it got right. 'We do not deny that evils existed in the Church but what purpose does it serve to highlight these when you teach the young?' Father Nereus Rodrigues, educational adviser to the Archbishop of Bombay was recently quoted as saying: 'What is the need for raking up the unsavoury facts of religion? History should stick to episodes and events that have a bearing on the present and the future.'

This live-and-let-live-forget-the-past secularism is not confined to the Christians. Speaking of the destruction of temples by Muslim invaders and forced conversions (if any) Riyaz Ahmed, president of the Bombay Unit of the Jamaat-e-Islami exclaimed: *Kharab baaten kyoon sikhayen?* (Why should we teach bad things?) The past is past. We must now work towards communal harmony.'

Kharab baaten kyoon sikhayen? In many ways that is the official line that secular India takes on history and there can be only one casualty as a result: the truth.

The Sunday Observer
13 March, 1983

The Quest for Utopia

Four days ago when I passed the customs barrier at Heathrow I asked the officer in charge what he thought of Micheal Oakeshott's latest book. He hadn't heard of it—nor, for that matter, had he heard of Oakeshott. I drew a similar blank at the enquiry counter at Terminal 3, at the greengrocers two days ago, at Boots the chemists yesterday, and with each of the four men I have so far accosted on the street with this unsuccessful enquiry. Well, no matter. Four days here—long enough for a leisurely read of the book's 194 pages—and I am ready to declare *On History and Other Essays*, to be one of the most significant intellectual events of the year in England.

'Who is this Oakeshott?' asked the doddering granny by the shaving cream counter at Boots. And well may she ask for it is no exaggeration to say that the time *is* out of joint and that conservative philosophers today (even the best of them) rate as highly in the popular imagination as machine room fitters and fast food technologists. For those in the know, however, Oakeshott is the ageing guru of High Toryism, a retired professor from the University of London who has chosen to spend the rest of his days in the seclusion of Cambridge, easily the most important conservative philosopher of the twentieth century.

Back in the thirties Oakeshott published a long (and largely unread) account of Bradleyan epistemology *Experience and its Modes;* several years later he edited Hobbes, on whom he has also written trenchantly. But what Oakeshott is (justly) most famous for are his essays, and in particular, his collection of them published over twenty years ago in 1962, titled *Rationalism in Politics*. In the title essay he set out what has come to be identified as the Oakeshott position. Rationalism for Oakeshott was a way of approaching problems (and in particular the affairs of state), a belief that all knowledge that is relevant to action is the sort of knowledge that can be set down, and found in, books, dogmas and manuals. As such this rationalism delighted in ideologies, with their demonstrable eternal truths, clearly defined 'acceptable' political ends, and their specifications of reliably established means for achieving these ends. For Oakeshott all this was an illusion, it was a mistake to suppose that one could govern effectively on the basis of some abstract 'immutable' principles which were universal in their scope. Governance was a matter that required an immersion in history, the history of those who were to be governed, for societies were not rationalist fictions controlled by prior textbook principles but rather organic entities that had a life of their own which had to be discovered by experience alone.

Clearly this position had nothing whatever to do with the official Conservative government (Free Enterprise and Monetarism are typical rationalist 'heresies' for Oakeshott) but it did echo and restate several principles of conservative philosophy as enunciated by the philosophers: traditionalism, a reverence for established institutions and traditions; organicism, the belief that society is a natural growth not a mechanistic aggregate; and political scepticism, the belief that political wisdom is something quite apart from the abstractions of political manuals. The government of Britain, like the governments of most countries, were (and are) in the grip of fancy rationalist schemes, and pursued these relentlessly, ignoring Oakeshott's almost lone voice of sanity.

Some time ago it was fashionable to debunk him, but then even that fashion passed and he was largely ignored, even in the universities, as some sort of Tory crank. But fortunately for us, Oakeshott kept writing, and in the collection of essays published last month, *On History*, we hear a voice that is both elegant and important, clever and wise.

The last essay of the collection retells the story of the Tower of Babel for our times. Oakeshott's subject here is the striving for utopia that characterizes most modern political schemes, particularly socialism. Conservative philosophers have always ranged themselves against absolutist schemes: Calvinism, Puritan Extremism, the Divine Right Theory, the Democratic Totalitarianism of the French Revolution, the Liberalism of the nineteenth century Whigs: Socialism with its arrogant ambitions is yet another humanist folly that conservatives try to cut to size.

The Tower of Babel story is a familiar one. It is the story of a titanic assault upon Heaven, not to occupy it but to destroy it, so as to free oneself of the threat that Heaven—and its justice—pose for us. In the original Nimrod was Noah's great-grandson who inherited the garment God gave to Adam. Chuffed by this magical inheritance Nimrod became exceedingly bold. But beneath his boldness ran a fear, a fear of God who had only generations ago, in Noah's time, released a flood to drown the depraved men who had come to inhabit Earth. So Nimrod roused his people to build the City of Freedom, Babel, and in it a tower which would enable them to climb into Heaven so as to destroy it. The project became an obsession. Oakeshott puts the enterprise in perspective: 'In the undertaking to subjugate God and Nature to human ambitions they had stumbled upon a life-work and had become slaves of an ideal.'

It was not an easy task, reaching Heaven. Uncle Abraham sneaked to God: and in his prayers to Him urged that the arrogant ones be punished not by means of another deluge but by 'confounding the tongues' of Nimrod and his fellows so that no one could understand what each other said. God obliged Abraham. 'Thus,' Oakeshott writes, 'not by a deluge, but in a flood of meaningless words, was the empire of Nimrod destroyed.' In Oakeshott's version Nimrod was a Duke in a land where there was an endless proliferation of wants and satisfactions, a land whose people (though not strikingly affluent themselves) were devoted to affluence and seduced by novelty. Their beliefs were as eclectic as their supermarket: 'Like the Borgia Pope Alexander IV, they believed to a limited extent in almost everything.'

On the first anniversary of his succession the Duke Nimrod held a *Durbar* where he urged his people to build a Tower that would reach to Heaven so that the Babelians could enter Heaven and loot it to satisfy their unsatisfied wants.

The project commenced and soon the community was so immersed in their (fruitless) activity that the Tower became their be-all and end-all. The higher the Tower rose the further Heaven receded. Oakeshott is excellent in the way he records how every activity of the people became a function of the Tower, how the larger absolutist 'social purpose' destroyed their lives.

But Oakeshott's story is more than just an *Animal Farm* for the eighties for it is not merely socialism proper that the story is getting at but rather a whole host of misguided social engineering projects that seek to fashion a utopia, that seek to recreate Earth in the image of Heaven. There is much in the story to suggest that Babel could plausibly be America—or even England.

Like all proper stories, it ends with a moral. Centuries after the fall of Babel an excavator came across a weather worn stone with an inscription on it. On being deciphered it read:

> Those who in fields Elysian would dwell
> Do but extend the boundaries of Hell

It is a moral worth considering, even in India, before it is too late.

The Sunday Observer
24 April, 1983

John Oliver Perry and the Voices of Emergency

This is going to be a difficult interview to report. After all, it's not every day that I'm thrown out of a hotel room. So I suppose I had better do the conventional thing and begin at the beginning.

Soon after Chandrashekhar completed his protracted walk across the country on the eighth anniversary of the declaration of the Emergency he released an anthology of poems, *Voices Of Emergency*, which was edited by one John Oliver Perry, a professor, we were told, at something called Tufts, somewhere in America.

When the book came up to me for review I was surprised to find in it an old poem of mine written long before I had attained majority. I had not written it with the Emergency in mind. Further, it is not a poem of which I am particularly proud so I cannot say I was entirely happy to see it republished. To make matters worse, not only had my permission not been sought for its inclusion, a central image of the poem had been crucially mauled owing to a small but significant typographical inversion: the *dog* of my original had been elevated to *god* in Perry's anthology.

Having worked on the other side of book and magazine production I am aware how difficult it often is to get everything right. So I decided not to make a fuss about these slips, to hold my ego in check and to proceed with perusing the volume.

Soon after, Professor Perry came to Bombay. I was asked if I would interview him for this magazine. I accepted the assignment. I was curious. Who was this Professor Perry? Where did he come from? Tufts, as far as I knew, were clumps of hair strewn on the floors of seedy barbershops.

I went to see Professor Perry at the Rosewood Hotel in Tulsiwadi, a lane as wholesome as any in Tardeo, at a little past five in the evening, on Friday, 5 August. My appointment was for five, I was late: the rain had interfered with the traffic and spattered the white of my pyjama.

Professor Perry beamed at me from behind the orange fuzz of his beard. His collaborator P.T. Sanghvi rose from the chair he had occupied and sat with the Professor on the bed. I had read of Prabhubhai Sanghvi in Perry's preface to the anthology; beyond that I knew nothing of him. Half an hour later, I was to be glad of his honest presence in the room but I shouldn't anticipate the end.

I decided to get into the deep end straightaway. 'Most of the poems are no good,' I said. 'What do you have to say about this?'

'I'm a relativist,' said Professor Perry routinely. It was a mumbo-jumbo line he'd obviously been spouting to journalists and other groupies all over the country. 'I don't accept the aesthetic experience as defined by *this* philosophy or *other*. What's a *good* poem depends on what affects you.'

'Well, that's why I said I found most of them bad. Now what I'm asking you is whether *you* found them bad as well. I want to know what sort of standards you have.'

'What *is* a good poem? Can you define a Good Poem?'

'Yes.'

'How do you define it?'

'Denotatively, not connotatively.'

Perry looked cheated. 'OK, OK. No, I don't make any special aesthetic claims for the poems in this volume. I don't think you've read the preface.'

'Well actually I have and I found it pretty turgid. I was just trying to check if I had understood the claim and the disclaimer on page twenty-nine correctly.'

For those readers who don't have a copy of this enormously important document before them, what I'm referring to is a pompous passage that goes like this:

> 'What the poetry records, therefore, is a national impulse which we can hope will be equally well and widely served should ever another such situation occur. The poetic record stands as exemplary for other nations and peoples faced with similar threats to their democratic governments. It is in substantiation of these generalizations, rather than to claim a special cultural value, wisdom, power or prestige for any group or party or any individual poets or poetics, that this anthology can best be understood.'

'Yes,' said the professor, 'I'm not making any special aesthetic claims for these poems, they represent a social record.'

'So you admit that most of these poems are no good.'

But the professor could not be easily persuaded of the value of plain speaking: a lifetime spent in America had caused his mind to be hopelessly addicted to polysyllable euphemism.

'No,' he said, 'they appear to me to be poems worthy of inclusion in this volume.'

I wasn't going to be fobbed off by obtuseness. 'Surely you don't accept everything that claims to be a poem as worthy of inclusion. What were the principles of selection you used? Did they have anything to do with quality or competence?'

'You don't seem to be aware of the nature of project,' he said smugly. 'I didn't select the poems,' he said as if proud of the fact. 'In each area there were co-ordinators, selectors and translators. Prabhubhai here was the co-ordinator for Maharashtra.'

'In that case I'm probably talking to the wrong person. Your function seems to have been merely decorative.'

'Yes,' said the professor, 'It's pretty decorative. I'm the organizer more than anything else.'

Such honesty would have been endearing had it not given the lie to the publisher's blurb on the dust cover: 'Selected and edited by John Oliver Perry . . .' If only we had a Trade Descriptions Act in India. . . .

We moved on to the subject of translation. With one notable exception (Lila Ray, translating from the Bengali) the translations seemed to me to be of poor quality. (Of course some poets have translated their own poems well—Jyotirmoy Dutta, for instance—but I was talking of the principal translators.) I qualified my observation by adding that what I meant was that while it was possible the translations were accurate, most of the English versions did not read well. Couldn't Perry have got decent poets to do the translating for him? It wasn't as if we didn't have any good translators—Ramanujan, Chitre, Mehrotra, Ezekiel, Parthasarathy. . . To get Dyaneshwar Nadkarni to translate from the Marathi was a sure strategy for failure. After beating about the bush a bit he came to the point. 'I don't think we could have asked better translators to deal with these poems. For example Dilip Chitre, I am in touch with him. I have just spent the morning seeing his film. The poems aren't worth his time.'

Wasn't that an admission that most of the poems weren't any good?

Double-think came naturally to the political radical. 'Of course not. But individually it is hard to justify a top ranking poet using his energy on these poems.'

Back in 1987 U.R. Anantha Murthy suggested to Perry who describes himself as 'a long-time civil rights and peace activist in America' that the latter could use his sabbatical in India researching into Emergency literature. Perry liked the idea (translated into Perry's polysyllables: 'We had discovered our many common cultural ideas, both literary and broadly political and the research project was designed to engage those interests') and promptly came to India. But the project wasn't as easy as that.

'From the start of this project in 1978,' writes Perry in the preface, 'I have had to confront both in myself and in the hundreds of persons I have consulted a profound and many-sided doubt not only about the general significance, but indeed the very existence, of authentic Emergency protest poetry.'

Later in the preface Perry outlines what he calls the two 'dubious hypotheses' commonly advanced about Emergency poetry. It is worth quoting them at some length as they seem to me pretty sound:

> 'Most strenuous was the point made by almost every literary academician, journalist, poet or editor that I met, or later corresponded with, right up to 1982. They said that not only was almost no good poetry written to protest the Emergency, but also that a lot of bad poetry had been brought out after the Emergency was lifted, probably falsely in order to attest to a social conscience, if not to incautious political or literary valour. It was also averred that in discussing the Emergency the intellectual elite, the hyper-educated literati, created for themselves exciting experiences out of paranoid delusions of officially inspired injuries and insults in order to exaggerate their own social importance, publishing these claims particularly after the Emergency was lifted. Noting that opportunism and cliquishness characterize literary artists generally, many Indians have told me that writers, like most people, shifted with social tides and have little genuine political concern or sophistication. Less cynically, it has been proposed that genuine social and cultural confusion more than political fear and oppression accounts for the relative silence of literary comment during the Emergency.'

Despite this abundant caution he received, Perry, who confesses he is raw when it comes to Indian writing ('. . . Indian literature, where I am totally untutored. . .') went ahead and produced a 299-page anthology with 280 poems from 250 poets. So I had looked hard in the forty-four-page preface for an adequate rebuttal of the 'dubious hypothesis'. For a *reason* to go ahead with this (quite possibly worthless) anthology.

All I had found was this: 'Fortunately in 1977-78 at least four regional anthologies had already been collected . . .' And later a single sentence which didn't strike me as being a particularly good rebuttal: 'It was all this (publishing) activity during the early Janata period which had aroused the suspicions I have recounted, but, of course, after 1980 most ulterior political motives had evaporated.' That's all.

Not surprisingly I decided to concentrate on the 'dubious hypotheses' and their hopeless rebuttal for the rest of the interview.

'That's not the only place in the preface where I rebut the hypothesis,' he said growing increasingly uncomfortable.

'Here is a copy of the book,' I said. 'Please point to me where exactly this rebuttal can be found.'

He grew shifty, 'I'm not sure I want to engage in this kind of discussion,' accusing me, as it were, of impropriety.

'Why not Professor Perry?' I continued. 'It's a perfectly respectable point I have raised, in fact it's absolutely central to your entire enterprise. For if there is no adequate rebuttal, the project is, as the hypotheses suggest, useless, even as a social record, let alone as a readable anthology of *poems*.'

He raised his voice and spoke clearly, articulating every word, as if I were an imbecile, 'I am not going to engage in this kind of discussion.'

'Put plainly, you are not going to answer my question?'

'I suppose you could say that.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I am going to insist that you answer it.'

'No.'

'Well then I am going to conclude that you have no answer as I can see no other reason why you refuse.'

Sprawled as he was on his bed, he grew vicious. He shouted. 'You're doing a political number on me, buddy.'

I scribbled that rapidly. He was still vicious. 'Are you going to quote me?' he demanded.

'Yes, perhaps.'

'You can't quote me saying that.'

'Why not?'

'Because if you quote me saying that I'll say you're a liar.'

'You can't do that,' I said. 'Prabhubhai heard you say it.' I read from my notes. 'Prabhubhai, didn't you hear Professor Perry say a minute ago, "You're doing a political number on me, buddy"?'

Prabhubhai nodded assent.

Beaten yet again, Perry started abusing me. 'I know what sort of person you are and the sort of relationships. . .'

I was eager to get on with the interview. Shaking my head in despair I said to both Prabhubhai and Perry, 'Please, please, please, let's come back to the interview, let's behave like adults. I'm not interested in the cheap sensation of a sharp quote. If you answer my questions Professor Perry and co-operate with me, I won't publish that stuff about my doing a political number. . .'

Perry was crazy by now. 'That's a threat.' I was about to explain to him that in fact he was the one who had threatened me ('If you quote me saying that, I'll say you're a liar') when I saw an arm shoot out towards me. 'Out, out,' he yelled and flung open the door. I scrambled out with as many things of mine as I could collect.

I have dealt with *Voices of Emergency* elsewhere, reviewing it for the *Sunday Observer*. So I shall not go into any details here. But I hope this account of my interview with the unsound professor gives a glimpse of one sort of person, who by importing into India his crassness, ignorance and 'relativism', perpetuates intellectual and aesthetic confusion here.

I have always been wary of imported 'peace activists' with dessicated minds who come to Asia to roost. Naipaul once called them revolutionaries with return tickets. And now at last, the truth about them is being recognized, even in the popular papers.

Speaking of Peter Burger's paper 'The Third World Or A Religious Idea', Iqbal Masud recently wrote in the *Indian Express*: 'The Third World is now becoming an intellectual escape or a holiday from the complex, individualistic, demanding, exhausted, emotional life of the West.' John Oliver Perry's vulgar *Voices of Emergency* is but the hurrahing of such a tourist. Thank you, Professor Perry. We can do without your loud hurrahs.

Imprint
September, 1984

Last Poems

Poems of Gitanjali: Introduced by Pritish Nandy;
Oriel Press (Routledge & Kegan Paul); pp 155; £5.95.

> *. . .Our emotions*
> *Are only 'incidents'*
> *In the effort to keep day and night together.*
> *It seems just possible that a poem might happen*
> *To a very young man: but a poem*

is not poetry—
That is a life.

—T.S. Eliot

In the sixteen years of her life Gitanjali Badruddin was not a poet but many poems happened to her. Had she lived longer it is of course possible she might have gone on to become a poet but such speculation is not my business here.

Gitanjali had cancer. For about a year before the end she knew she was terminally ill but didn't want her mother to know she knew. In that period over a hundred poems poured from her. She hid them. She stuffed them everywhere: under the mattress, under sofa seats, behind books, inside cushion covers.

It was only after her death in 1977 that her mother began to discover the poems. Then by an extraordinary set of circumstances which Pritish Nandy relates in his moving introduction they came to be published in a book, thousand of miles away from Bombay, where Gitanjali lived and died.

The justification for publishing these poems lies halfway between the literary and the sentimental. More than halfway perhaps. It would be patronizing, and a disservice, to Gitanjali to say that the poems are good or that more than half a dozen of them move me. But some of these poems were published in the journals, at first in the *Illustrated Weekly* and more recently in the *Telegraph* and they moved many there.

Judging them is a difficult matter. Should one make allowances for Gitanjali's age? I think not. Brilliant poems have been written at fifteen and sixteen and handicap has its place in golf, not poetry. Should one separate her poems from her story?

I think so. Biographical details may have an intimate connection with the work but for the serious reader they must be a thing apart. These details satisfy our curiosity, our urge for sensation and sentiment; they feed our prurience, not our imagination. At best biography can inform the serious reader as to which order the works were written in and may suggest a context, suggest which other works the works at hand may profitably be read in conjunction with.

These poems have their faults, and they are the faults of most adolescent verse. A self consciously 'poetic' syntax is freely employed and it weakens the poems: 'And I make a promise brave'; 'I forever rest'; 'Hold me tight my mother dear'. And it's not just syntax but diction as well that is infected thus: 'In pensive mood'; 'Therefore speak not in vain'; 'But the bitter truth/has stung my very soul'.

In his introduction, Nandy tries to brush these problems aside. 'These poems of Gitanjali may not have been meticulously crafted. You could fault them on form or literary style. But does that really matter? Does it matter whether Gitanjali could write a perfect sonnet or not?' I think that is an unfair simplification of the issue.

Style is not a sterile exercise removed from feeling (the perfect sonnet) but to acquire style it is often necessary to go through several exercises and some of them may appear sterile. Beauty has to be won with effort, and style is, in the end, not a facility but a freedom from facility. The facile phrase in poetry is not merely a cosmetic defect, it is symptomatic of a more regrettable facility, a facility of attitude. That is the real importance of style. It is important to stress this for too often people automatically assume that style is independent of content, that language is independent of attitude, and that diction and syntax are independent of tone.

But much comes through despite the blemishes. Bruce Allsop observes in the preface to this book that these poems are not a record of suffering but that they transcend sorrow. That is remarkable about some of these poems. Whether this transcendence was an ideal Gitanjali groped towards in the poems or an attitude of hers which the poems document is difficult to tell. But on the occasions when Gitanjali fought the temptations of borrowed voice, her poems achieved a quiet dignity that cannot fail to move:

It was the first dawn
of my awareness
of how short I was of time
The impact
of this knowledge
was so painful that
I soon overcame
my feelings of hurt and
placed myself and my trust
in the palm of His hand.

(The Day of Judgement)

And again:

I am being used
by God like a

harp
One moment
He caresses me
like a fond child,
next minute
He grasps me firmly
and strikes

(The Harp)

In poems like these the achievement is real, the voice true; and the pain, disturbingly laid out on the page along with its dissolution.

The Sunday Observer
1983

The Tele-Visualizing of Kipling's Kim

Earlier this year Angus Wilson was in Bombay and when we met, the talk inevitably veered round to Raj literature. Wilson is no stranger to the subject having written a highly acclaimed book on Kipling. He recognized that at present there was a great deal of vulgar interest in the Raj, quite possibly, he suggested, part of a Thatcherite obsession with Empire. But he would not dismiss interest in the Raj as superficially as that. 'At a more intelligent level,' he went on, 'it could be that the Raj and India provide our art some more fixed and formal shapes, some more interesting shapes, shapes like the extraordinary relationship between Kim and the lama, shapes our literature wouldn't have without recourse to India.'

It is difficult to disagree. Even after the appearance of *Midnight's Children, Kim* is still quite possibly the finest story about India, as Nirad Chaudhuri once described it. Kipling has of late been maligned as an imperialist and less plausibly, as a racist and in consequence recent generations of Indians have been educated without ever reading *Kim.* (Everyone knows the first line of *The Ballad of East and West:* 'Oh, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet' but how many know the third and fourth lines of the same poem: 'But there is neither East not West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,/When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!'?) But unpleasant though Kipling's attitudes may be in some of his works, in *Kim* he transcended the parochialism that gives offence and his empathy with all the Indian characters comes through clearly.

Though generations of English schoolchildren have read *Kim* as an adventure story it is much more than that, in fact it isn't a children's novel at all. True there is the adventure of Kim working for the Secret Service, wresting secrets about the North-West Frontier Province, keeping the bad Russians out, playing the Great Game. But Mahbub Ali, the Afghan horse trader and secret agent is only one of Kim's gurus: the lama is the other and he instructs Kim in the Way of the Wheel. The tease in the novel is that we never know which quest Kipling considers the more important: both are concerned with seeing right and Kim inherits both visions.

Towards the end of the novel Kim, the waif, the Irish orphan who was reared in the bazaars of Lahore, wants to know who he is. As Ravi Seth, the fourteen-year-old boy who will play Kim in the film puts it: 'He has to decide whether he is black or white and he decides that doesn't matter.' Angus Wilson's answer is a little more literary but substantially the same: 'The story of Kim and the lama is . . . the culmination and essence of all the transcendence that Kipling gained from his Indian experience. In it alone of all his works he does ask "Who is Kim?" although he cannot answer the question. In a sense, the answer is the book itself, for it is the best thing he ever wrote.' (*The Stranger Ride of Rudyard Kipling*, Secker and Warburg, 1977.) It is a question that has always reached the Anglo-Indians: and of late the Indo-Anglians have begun to ask it as well.

Back in 1950 Victor Saville directed MGM's version of the novel: Dean Stockwell and Eroll Flynn spying for the Empire against the Russians in Afghanistan. The result was predictable. Now with the Raj boom on in the West these days it was hardly likely that *Kim* would be left out. David Conroy, Managing Director of London Films, got the bright idea two-and-a-half years ago. What he didn't have was the four million dollars.

No matter. Several trips to America later he had done a deal with the CBS network. They agreed to buy the finished product for American television at a whopping price. Conroy hired his crew and came to India to shoot, bringing with him some forty-five people.

Initially Waris Hussein, the celebrated TV director, was to have directed the film. But due to his post-production commitments with *Princess Daisy*, a mini-serial he is making for NBC (an adaptation of the Judith Krantz novel of that name) he was unable to make *Kim*. So Conroy hired Al Rakinoff, a Canadian director who lives and works in England. Unfortunately an illness in the family prevented Rakinoff from taking on the assignment at the last moment and in consequence John Davies who was to have produced the film took over as director and Conroy moved in as producer. The two have often worked together, notably in the late sixties when Conroy was with the BBC and Davies a freelance director. Together they made *Nana*, *Germinale* and the epic twenty-part *War and Peace*.

I reached Manali on 23 September on the flight that brought Peter O'Toole in. He looked dazed. He had just flown in from England hours ago and the ravage of the ride could be discerned on his face. He was accompanied by a dour secretary, a young woman fitted with pillars instead of legs. At Chandigarh airport O'Toole walked to the edge of the tarmac and lit a cigarette. I should have cadged a few minutes from him just then but I had to go into the terminal to make sure about the onward flight. It was a pity because as soon as we reached Manali, he became the meditative lama and had to be guided everywhere by his plump secretary. (At one point, two days after he had reached Manali he wandered up to the table where we were having lunch by the river Beas and approached director John Davies' son, Ben. 'Hello Ravi.' Ben's mother corrected him and before she could point to Ravi Seth, sitting opposite, the only other child at the resort, O'Toole had tripped and begun dragging his dazed self to another table.)

Apparently Kim had been a childhood friend of O'Toole's and he was quite keen on the part of the lama. The only problem that Conroy perceived was O'Toole's piercing blue eyes. But the actor agreed to wear brown contact lenses to correct this. For a man who had once described acting as 'just farting about in disguise' he did seem to take his work seriously.

The crew was divided at four hotels in Manali. I stayed at Span Resorts with the director and the major actors. By any reckoning it must be the most luxurious hotel in the Himalayas, what with its stone chalets with pine pillars, its extravagantly stocked bar (the best in the country) and its excellent view of the river Beas and the Kulu valley. The shooting didn't begin for a few days so I spent my time in the hotel talking to the actors.

Ravi Seth seems an excellent choice for Kim: half Jain, half American. The surprising thing about about him is that at school (the International School at Kodaikanal) he has acted in only two plays: 'In the seventh we did *Rapunzel* and this year we did a take-off on *Sleeping Beauty*.' When selected for the role he didn't really know *Kim* though he had read *The Jungle Book* a few years ago. 'I didn't know Kipling was considered an imperialist,' he said insouciantly.

John Rhys-Dávies was less insouciant. He is an impressive actor who has played several interesting roles, notably Rodrigues the Portuguese in *Shogun* and Salah the Arab sidekick of Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. He is to play Babu Hurree Chunder in the film. 'When I was at university in the early sixties, *Kim* was very much out of fashion. In fact I was looked upon by most of my friends as a crypto fascist for even daring to mention Kipling because it was a time when we rejected all the colonialist and imperialist attitudes. But he is a very fine writer and can tell a good story, a journalist in fact.'

Over the years Rhys-Davies has changed his views on Kipling somewhat. 'There are attitudes in his books which I find, which I used to find, plainly disgusting. I now think I was oversimplifying, because I think that he was conscious of an ambivalence there, sometimes. Sometimes he is merely recording some things like a journalist does. . . I think *Kim* is one of the great childhood books, like *Swallows and Amazons* or *Pinocchio*. You know it's one of those wonderful books of childhood that you read as a child and look back in affection as an adult. You can love *Robinson Crusoe* and still be opposed to racism. It may appear incompatible but if you have that rigid attitude towards books then for God's sake half of what was written before 1950 is out.'

The shooting schedule is tight. Two weeks in Manali, three-and-a-half weeks in Jodhpur, two-and-a-half weeks in Agra. And then, at the end a week's studio work back in England—the lama's cell, Father Xavier's tent and a few other shots. Conroy and his crew are busy, determined to make a good movie.

Good intentions apart, what must be recognized is that *Kim* is being made for a TV audience and American TV audiences are particularly stupid. (When Olivier's *Richard III* was shown on American television, General Motors sponsored the programme—NBC had paid half a million dollars for the one screening—and during the commercial breaks viewers were told who Shakespeare was. What really got Olivier's goat though was the commercial in which viewers were told that a certain automobile had 'more power than all the horses in *Richard III*'.) How much will they understand of *Kim*?

Already two concessions have been made for this audience in terms of alterations in the script. One, modern audiences are no longer familiar with the political situation of the day: Afghanistan being protected by the British from the bad Russians. (When the Russians walked into Afghanistan and it seemed possible that Reagan might send in the troops, an American magazine conducted a poll that revealed that approximately ninety-eight per cent of the Americans didn't know what Afghanistan was.) To cope with this ignorance David Conroy has added a few scenes at the beginning of the movie featuring two Rajas, the Raja of Hilas and Raja of Bunar to be played by veterans of the stage, Aamir Raza Husain and Jalal Agha. In these scenes the political situation of the time will be sketched in. Of course there were no Rajas of Hilas and Bunar—the Frontier was ruled by Afghan tribal chiefs—but this slip is Kipling's. Though the Rajas don't actually appear in the novel we do have Hurree Babu explaining to Kim: 'Hilas and Bunar—Rajas with guns—undertook for a price to guard the passes against all coming from the North.'

The other change in the script is the more serious one and here the hand of the American financiers becomes evident. (It must be recalled in this context that David Lean has been plagued by his American financiers in much the same way: in *Passage to India* they insist the 'romantic interest' must be developed between Adele and Aziz if no one else can be found.) Conroy has gone in for a sub-plot that didn't exist in the original, a love story between Corporal Bruce (played by Mick Ford) and Indra. Kim assists the two in their assignations and finally when the two get together, Corporal Bruce deserts the army for Indra's charms. Conroy tries to justify the addition: 'One can use the sub-plot almost as shorthand to tell Kim's own story. . .' but it won't wash.

The other concession of course is in the use of Western actors. Tyrone Power was somehow 'acceptable' in 1940 in *The Rains Came* and Yul Brynner as late as 1966 in *The Long Duel* but thanks to Merchant-Ivory and now to Attenborough (Kingsley's role was exceptionally successful but the rest of the casting was racially accurate) I think the audiences have become too sophisticated to accept Western actors playing Indians on screen. Thank God Lean didn't go in for a Robert De Niro as Aziz. Unfortunately, Conroy and his team (casting director Ann Fieldan) thought otherwise. The three important Indian roles—Mahbub Ali, the lama, Babu Hurree Chunder—have been given to prominent Westerners. Director John Davies was on the defensive when he discussed this with me. 'One of the problems obviously is, if you're mounting a production like this and of course, yes, it's a compromise if you like, you're making it necessarily for a Eastern television audience, it's very expensive to make. To make it possible you have to employ actors who are going to bring in the audience. . . Maybe it would be nice if it wasn't a fact. But it's a fact.'

David Conroy was definite about what he wanted from the film. 'My real interest is the story of a young boy who is growing up in India as an Indian and suddenly he is told he is English. Then he begins his search for his own identity. *I'm neither, I'm Kim*. That's what's important. That, if you like it, is the story. What permeates all my work (and *Kim* is a good example of this) is having a good yarn which appeals to a mass audience, that's what I want to do and at the same time put in a little thought for them, something that they wouldn't normally come across and I'd like to think that if other producers made this film they wouldn't put it in. They'd go for the adventure story.'

Has he made concessions for this mass audience? 'No, the dilemma never arose: should I play for the mass audience or not? My dilemma instead was: is my vision stereotyped? How am I perceiving India? How am I perceiving Indians and their behaviour? And the answer comes back: through European eyes, with very little knowledge of India, not sufficient knowledge of India to do this, and maybe with the heritage of the British Raj sitting on my shoulder. . . One of the edicts I have issued is: there will be no snake charmers. There will be no Indian rope tricks. That's not what I want to see. I want to see India.'

On the call-sheet for 26 September, the first day of the shooting, the first assistant, a genial podgy Cockney called Gino, inserted a motto for the day: 'Out of intense complexities intense simplicities emerge.' No doubt he was referring to the seemingly unwieldy logistics of the operation and the disorganization that was evident amongst the actors on the weekend before it all began. (Nobody seemed to know the other: the landslides had played havoc with the valley's hills and in one case there was a motor accident on the way to the hotel: nobody was aware that the unit had brought up a doctor from Delhi.) Gino's motto expressed the hope that all would go well. But equally, it was a comment on the film.

Let's see what Conroy sees. I tend to be wary of intense simplicities that just emerge from intense complexities. As Mahbub Ali wisely cautioned Kim: 'The game is so large that one sees but a little at a time.'

Imprint
November, 1983

Is the Film Biased?

Soon after Richard Attenborough's sanitized version of the Mahatma's life appeared on the screen, one began to hear the rumblings of discontent. There were several complaints, but the absolute exclusion of Subhas Chandra Bose from the film stood at the top of the list. And it would be fair to say that though critics as far flung as Salman Rushdie in the London *Times* raised the point ('Truth Retreats When the Saint Goes Marching In' 2 May 1983) it was principally in Bengal that Netaji's presence in the film was missed.

So last year when David Boulton, head of current affairs at Granada, one of Britain's independent television companies announced that he intended to make a documentary on Bose and his Indian National Army, 'on aspects of the Indian independence movement which, for one reason or another, have not been given due weight in previous film studies', it appeared to many that all would be well in the end. But perhaps the expectations raised were very high and Netaji's followers felt their view would *become* the official view of the Granada film. I can see how such a misunderstanding could arise. Recently, with the controversy over Kurien's Operation Flood in the air, someone who had once made a series of three programmes on Amul for Doordarshan remonstrated with me, saying he could not believe Alvares's accusations. After all, he had the *facts*, he said. When I asked him how much time he had spent on researching them, how he had gone about this task, he was frank. No, he said, he hadn't researched them himself, he had got them all from Amul.

Doordarshan budgets being what they are, there was no money for independent research. Fortunately British television companies have higher budgets and consequently their documentaries are more independent of any one source of information. Perhaps the Netaji Research

Bureau (headed by Sisir Bose, Netaji's nephew and a Cong (I) MLA) and Netaji's associates who helped Boulton, all of whom are reportedly dismayed by the result, did not quite realize this. Or perhaps they felt that this financial independence would enable the Granada producer to plump for *their* view, one which they doubtless felt was the correct one.

In the event, this hasn't happened. Boulton did not become a convert to Boseism. Much to the annoyance of Ashis Ray, the *Telegraph*'s London correspondent who once longingly fancied there was a possibility of that happening. And thank God too. In consequence, *The War of the Springing Tiger* which was shown on television in Britain on 4 January this year is (among other things) a work of biography, not hagiography; not a good biography but a passable one, given that it is after all only a fifty-minute television film on the INA made for an audience which had almost certainly never heard of Bose before.

Of course, not everyone thinks so. On 15 December last year Granada organized a preview of the film in a mini-theatre in West London to which the press was invited. I don't know about the others but certainly Ashis Ray seems to have emerged from the theatre 'shocked at the slander and misrepresentation'. Unfortunately no one from the High Commission had been invited to the preview. I learnt that Granada later regretted this: Niranjan Desai had just been posted away from London and they weren't in touch with anyone else in India House so apparently Ashis Ray took it upon himself to acquaint the High Commission with the nature of the 'slander and misrepresentation'. In doing so he made a pretty crucial error of misquotation, one which was exactly repeated in his subsequent piece in the *Telegraph* titled 'ITN Film on Netaji Full of Raj Hangovers' (8 January 1984). It is important, therefore, to examine Ray's charges.

According to Ray, 'In the segment cited by Mr Boulton very coveniently (*sic*) labels Bose as "a clown in jackboots" among other epaulettes (*sic*), as well "a disciple of Marx and Mussolini".' It is a sentence rich in error. One may blame the printer's devil for the first illiteracy but surely it is *epithets* that Ray has in mind? (Netaji's army did have some interesting epaulettes—see the plate between pages 172 and 173 in Hugh Toye's *The Springing Tiger*—but none of them, I fear, were the work of David Boulton.) But then one doesn't expect the London correspondent of the *Telegraph* to write correct English and it is not his mauling of the language one objects to but his inattention to fact. *At no point in the film does anyone call Bose a clown in jackboots*. The sentence Ray is presumably referring to is a balanced one and it refuses to take sides: 'But if Bose frozen at attention in his high leather boots looked a clown to the old guard he seemed to the young, a man of destiny, their reassurance that Indians didn't have to turn the other cheek.' The sentence refers to the differing reactions to Bose at the 1928 Calcutta AICC session.

What probably confused Ray was the way the camera moved, concentrating for the first half of the sentence on Bose's leather boots and then dramatically moving up to his face for the second half. That Ray should have perceived the phrase 'clown in jackboots' is both testimony to the strange way in which the aural and the visual combine in television and to Ray's inattention. What is stranger still is that the *India Today* report titled 'Tiger by the Tail' (31 January 1984) which appeared *after* the film had been shown in London and which acknowledges its correspondent Bonny Mukherjee's report from London should repeat the same mistake: 'But contrary to what Granada had originally touted the film as, it ridicules Bose more often than not, employing such phrases as "a clown in jackboots". . .'

The *India Today* report has one other major inaccuracy, but this time it is Prem Sahgal who is to blame. I presume the old INA hero who has contributed to the film had not seen it when he spoke to *India Today* and is thus guilty of merely shooting his mouth off on hearsay: 'It is a total distortion of history,' charged Prem Sahgal, one of the INA members interviewed in the film, 'Chaudhuri claims that Netaji was a worshipper of Hitler. There are several letters of Netaji to prove what he thought of Hitler.' *At no point in the film does Nirad Chaudhuri claim Netaji worshipped Hitler.* On the contrary Chaudhuri is shown saying: 'Germany was at war with Great Britain. That was enough for him. . . He fanatically believed that Germany would win. So he went over.' This analysis of Bose's motivation runs counter to that which Sahgal mysteriously imputes to Chaudhuri.

To return to Ray's contentions. Yes, Boulton does call Bose 'the disciple of Marx and Mussolini' but is it a slander? Consider the following passages from chapter eighteen titled 'A Glimpse of the Future' from Bose's famous book of 1934, *The Indian Struggle (1920-1934)*. Bose quotes from a press statement issued by Nehru on 18 December 1933 in which Nehru expressly condemned fascism and said that he chose the communist ideal by stating: 'There is no middle road between Fascism and Communism.' Bose then expressed his own views on the subject:

> 'The view expressed here is, according to the writer, fundamentally wrong. . . Considering everything, one is inclined to hold that the next phase in world-history will produce a synthesis between Communism and Fascism. And will it be a surprise if that synthesis is produced in India? The view has been expressed in the Introduction that in spite of India's geographical isolation, the Indian awakening is organically connected with the march of progress in other parts of the world. . . Consequently, there need to be no surprise if an experiment, of importance to the whole world, is made in India—especially as we have seen with our own eyes that another experiment (that of Mahatma Gandhi) made in India has aroused profound interest all over the world.'

There are no prizes offered for guessing who Bose thought would author that experiment.

Bose went on:

> 'In spite of the antithesis between Communism and Fascism, there are certain traits common to both. Both Communism and Fascism believe in the supremacy of the State over the individual. Both denounce parliamentarian democracy. Both believe in party rule. Both believe in dictatorship of the party and in the ruthless suppression of all dissenting minorities. Both believe in a planned industrial reorganisation of the country. These common traits will form the basis of the new synthesis. That synthesis is called by the writer *Samyavada*—an Indian word, which means literally "the doctrine of synthesis or equality". It will be India's task to work out this synthesis.'

However it should be mentioned that Bose did recant somewhat from this position. In 1938 when R. Palme Dutt asked Bose to clarify his remarks on fascism and communism in *The Indian Struggle* Bose said: 'My political ideas have developed further since I wrote my book three years ago. What I really meant was freedom, and having won it, we wanted to move in the direction of socialism. This is what I meant when I referred to "a synthesis between Communism and Fascism". Perhaps the expression I used was not a happy one. But I should like to point out that when I was writing the book, Fascism had not started on its imperialist aggression, and it appeared to me merely an aggressive form of nationalism.' (*Daily Workers*, 24 January, 1938)

But here Bose was being decidedly shifty: if all he wanted was freedom and socialism in 1934, why did he disagree so violently with

Nehru who wanted just that? And as for his inability to identify the imperialist designs of Fascism back in 1934, that's a bit dodgy too. Hadn't Bose read *Mein Kampf* in which it is quite clear what Hitler thought of Indian independence? '. . .as a man of Germanic blood, (I) would, in spite of everything, rather see India under British rule than any other.' (*Mein Kampf,* translated in English, London, 1969, p 602.) But there are no simple answers here. Perhaps Bose felt he could by force of his personality persuade Hitler into thinking otherwise. The argument can go on forever and the eventual synthesis will be very subtle. My point is merely that Boulton is not way off the mark when he describes Bose in a fifty-minute TV film as 'a disciple of Marx and Mussolini'.

Ray goes on: 'The great escape from the country in 1940 is described as unwarranted, and an attempt by Bose to give himself importance.' It is true that the film does suggest that the trouble Sisir Bose and his uncle went to in escaping was possibly unnecessary, and rather annoyingly, it does not give references to the 'records (that) show that the cloak and dagger operation was probably unnecessary'. But then television documentaries rarely provide us with footnotes. At any rate Ray is wrong in his second assertion that Boulton makes out the escape as an attempt on Bose's part to give himself importance. That is an incorrect and uncharitable reading of the script. Not only is there no direct assertion to that effect, it is not even implied. In fact Boulton is quite clear on the point that Bose *didn't* know of the alleged British lack of interest in him. ('But Bose didn't know that, nor. . .')

In the next paragraph Ray makes more mistakes. 'Moving away to Germany,' he writes, 'and the Far East, the commentator does not avoid the temptation of naming Bose "a puppet of Hitler and the Japanese" and as "the villian of the piece" as far as, presumably, India's north-eastern borders, and the public upheaval that followed at the time of the Red Fort trial of Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Sahgal and G.S. Dhillon.' *Now, at no point does the commentator name Bose as 'a puppet of Hitler and the Japanese'. Nor, for that matter, does anybody else.* What is suggested is that both Hitler and the Japanese used Bose. But the relationship is conceived as having been symmetrical, rather like Mohan Singh's assessment (he was the first commander of the INA) of his relationship with the Japanese: '. . .if I put it bluntly I was trying to exploit them in the interest of my country and they were trying to exploit me in the interest of their country.'

Right in the film's beginning the narrator says: 'Britain and India like to believe that Independence was achieved by moral force and imperial magnanimity. These men don't fit that comfortable view.' And in the end the narrator concludes: 'The INA itself turned out to be a military disaster, but in defeat it won a kind of victory confirming the British in their conviction that at last it was time to wave India good-bye.' I cannot think of a more generous estimate of the achievement of the INA, except those that fly into fantasy. Bose's single-minded struggle to liberate India comes through clearly in the film. Puppets are incapable of intention and do not use those who pull the strings.

As for this business about Bose being the 'villain of the piece,' Ray is once again wrong: *the narrator or commentator never says this.* Hugh Toye is quoted as saying that but one needs to be sensitive to the nuances of English speech to know that he is not voicing a bald, personal opinion but instead is summarizing the position as it was seen by the British at the end. Anyone who has read Toye's life of Bose ***The Springing Tiger*** (Cassel, 1959) will know that Toye's estimate of Bose is far richer than that. The epilogue to his book in which he blames his own community's racial prejudice for most of the troubles of this century in British India should acquit him of the charge of such a simplistic judgement: 'This then may be the lesson of Amritsar, the lesson of Subhas Chandra Bose, the lesson of India. Racial prejudice breeds racial hatred; racial hatred breeds hysteria and racial conflict.'

Another charge I have heard made by Indians in London, but one which Ray wisely does not make, is about the place where Bose is quoted by Boulton as saying, 'Let your slogan be "blood, blood, blood".' It has been thought by some that this is a case of Boulton getting mixed up with Bose's famous slogan. 'Give me blood and I'll give you freedom.' But Boulton is not confused on this particular point. On new year's day 1945, Bose's special order of the day to the Azad Hind Fauj ended with just those words: 'Therefore, let your slogan—your battle cry—for the year 1945 be. . . "blood, blood, blood" '. Where Boulton is confused—or confusing—is that the context of this quotation in the film suggests that the slogan was advanced around 13 March, 1945, in response to the desertions.

Finally Ray's last charge is that 'the film also indicts Gandhi for doing a somersault by going to pay homage to Netaji's Elgin Road house in Calcutta after the announcement of his still challenged death in a plane crash, and takes Jawaharlal Nehru to task for "using" the INA trials to secure his political position.' By this point the reader of this piece must know that when Ashis Ray uses quotation marks nobody has actually said what is in the quotes but it's just that Ray thinks that the device will make credible his misremembered and usually misleading phrase, that Ray has what can politely be described as an unorthodox sense of punctuation.

True to form, nobody in the film uses the word 'using' in the context of Nehru's decision to join the INA defence lawyers but in this case Ray's misremembering is not specially misleading. The line in the commentary was 'even Gandhi and Nehru clambered aboard the INA bandwagon. . .' This was followed by Nirad Chaudhuri's claim that 'in the case of Gandhi even more than Nehru it was opportunism pure and simple'. It is a judgement I would not wish to go along with, at least not until I have discussed the matter with Nirad Babu and am apprised of his reasons for saying so. It is very difficult to form judgements in the case of Gandhi's intentions and certainly the record of Bose's last meeting with Gandhi at Sewagram in June 1940 (kept by Nathulal Parikh) and Gandhi's conversations with Louis Fischer *A Week with Gandhi* contain so many ambivalent attitudes that it is difficult to decide the matter easily.

I have spent a lot of time demolishing what I call 'the Ray case' upon which much of the government of India's complaint to Granada was based because I think it typical that the government should take seriously such hearsay riddled with error. This does not mean I think the Boulton film a good one. I have my complaints, but none I think are strong enough for the government to ban the film in India, as several London newspapers in early January reported it had done.

The tone of the commentary is flip, and this has probably got something to do with the reaction of people like Ray towards the film. It is amusing to have the narrator tell us, as he does to the end, that Abid Hasan now lives in Hyderabad with his niece 'who sells cotton dhurries to Habitat', but when it gets to more serious matters the desire on the part of the scriptwriter to provoke a wry smile may work against clarity. For one, I do feel Bose's precise reaction to fascism deserved more than a passing quip that when he canvassed for support in Germany in the thirties. 'If he saw a distinction between his own socialism and Hitler's National Socialism he kept it to himself.' It is not that the quip is *wrong*; simple as that. Of all the comments on the film I've read in the Indian press, the one that comes closest to what I feel is something Mihir Bose is supposed to have said: 'Subhas Bose comes through as a one-dimensional character who woke up one morning and said: "Let's get rid of the British." ' (*India Today*, 31 January, 1984.) Boulton lacks that sympathy with Bose which is the prerequisite of a good biography.

But beyond the flip tone there must be something else which has caused this row, caused the government to quite irrationally ban the film. Of course we Indians are very sensitive in matters concerning foreign perceptions of us (the Louis Malle films are a case in point) but could it not be something to do with the peculiar fascination Netaji has for us? In a paper in *New Quest* (May-June 1980) Agehananda Bharati lamented the fact that anthropologists have not as yet studied the Netaji phenomenon, maintaining that it was the closest exemplification of Weber's 'idea type'. 'Netaji had, in Weberian terms, both charisma of person and charisma of office, like hardly any of his contemporaries. And of course such perceptions are epic perceptions, in anthropological terms—outsiders, non-Indians usually did not perceive such charisma; some Japanese officers and administrators came close to it, but hardly any Westerners did.'

According to the Swami of Syracuse, this is because the Western value system lacks the paradigm of *sant-sipahis*, '*kshytriya*-cum-*rishi* (warrior-saint) type heroes in the occidental value taxonomy'. Perhaps. If so, this would account for Boulton's flip tone. And our error-ridden rage.

The Illustrated Weekly of India
11 March, 1984

Life and Death at the Prithvi

> *Ham log ek khel kyon nahin khelte? Chalo ham insaan banen our aisa zaahir karen jaise ham vakkehi zinda hain thodi hider ke liye . . .*
> (Why don't we people play a game? Come on, let's become humans and try to prove that we are really alive, for a short while . . .)
> —Jimmy Porter in *Main Zinda Hoon Main Sochta Hoon*

The last time I occupied this spot it was to shout praise for Bharat Dabholkar's production in Maharashtrian English, *It's All Yours Janaab*; for once, some readers of the *Observer* seem to have agreed with me; in fact, the only way I can explain this rare accord is by concluding that the production must have been at least as good as I made it out to be, if not better. Since then, I am happy to report, *Janaab* has played to full houses and from the full-throated laughter throughout the show and the large hand at the end it does not appear that audiences share the opinion of the regular drama critic of this paper who mincingly dismissed it as 'a well-intentioned but futile experiment' which encited she said, 'six or seven guffaws'.

Today I am not interested in whether Ms Nevatia can count, or whether, indeed, she can laugh; this time round there is something else to praise. The second Prithvi Festival concludes tonight and I wish to thank unreservedly the organizers of the festival for giving us just the sort of theatre festival we need in India: not a collection of student and fringe productions for buffs who wish to identify 'potential' but a selection of the most highly-praised productions in recent years drawn from all over the country. In a country where even professional theatre productions do not play six nights a week—with matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays—it is very important that we get a chance of seeing the much-acclaimed productions, that we get a chance to see what we have missed, to work out ourselves what we like and why we like it, and conversely, what we dislike and why.

I have managed to see only ten of the plays at the festival: some of them were good, some of them bad, some both good *and* bad: I shall not review the plays here: I trust the *Observer* critic will perform that duty. Instead, I shall try to communicate four ideas that occurred to me while watching the plays. I have said four but the more I think about it they all seem like four faces of one idea, which is hardly surprising since all four of them are responses to the one problem that has been troubling me: why is the bulk of our English theatre so depressingly bad? After all, we have good actors like Vijay Crishna and Naseeruddin Shah and competent lighting men like Dereck Jeffreys. What goes wrong? I refuse to have anything to do with the simplistic Goswami notion that English theatre *per se* is 'irrelevant' in—or to—India: it isn't. The question instead is: what sort of English theatre is appropriate here, given our actors and audiences, and why?

The first point involves the distinction between texture and structure. *Death of a Salesman* possesses excellent structure, as does *A Streetcar*

Named Desire; undoubtedly it was this that made Alyque Padamsee burst out impatiently in an interview with Malavika Sanghvi in the *Observer* not too long ago: 'How can I do a third-rate local play that doesn't move me—because it's about Suresh or Champa—when I can be doing a masterpiece like *A Streetcar Named Desire*?' Of course the way he has loaded the comparison ('a third rate local play') one is inclined to agree with him but it is important to see that Padamsee has missed the importance of texture: can he give to a production of *Streetcar* the texture it needs to come alive? Going by his production of *Death of a Salesman* which I saw at the festival, the answer is no. And it's not just him, the much touted *Trojan Women* similarly failed: every play is written in some language—*Trojan Women* was an English translation of Euripedes—but none of the actors in either production, not even Vijay Crishna, by far the best of the lot, were able to bring out the sort of muscularity the language demands. Compare these productions with almost any competently produced Hindi play and you will see what I mean. I know of no Indian actor who can speak English as the Americans speak it and few, very few, who can speak it as the English themselves speak it—Alyque Padamsee and Sabira Merchant can do neither so it's not surprisingly a disaster when they exhibit their inability on stage. In contrast, Atmaram Bhende and Harish Patel can speak English the way we speak it and so in *Janaab* the muscle is there and we can feel it. It is interesting that the experiments in folk theatre suffer from precisely the opposite problem: both the Mewari *Pashu Gayatri* (Disha Natya Sanstha and the Chattisgarhi *Gaon ka Naam Sasural Mera Naam Damaad*) (Naya Theater) possess excellent texture but weak structures. Jabbar Patel's *Ghashiram Kotwal, It's All Yours Janaab* and Nadira Babbar's *Main Zinda Hoon Main Sochta Hoon* possess both satisfying structure and texture.

There is a problem, though, with this last play and that brings me to my second point: structure and texture are not enough, there is the problem of context. *Zinda Hoon* is a Hindi translation of *Look Back in Anger* and in many ways it has an advantage over English productions in India of the Osborne play. Anupam Kher's excellent Jimmy Porter is able to register the quick shifts between condescension, elation, frustration and mimicry, largely, one suspects, because he is speaking a language over which he has complete control and whose nuances both he and the audience are intimately aware of. But there is on the other hand a disadvantage in translating the play into Hindi. It is all very well to talk about the universality of theatre ('Theatre,' Padamsee pronounces sagely in the same interview, 'is a universal experience.') but it seems to me more guff has been written about this than any other aspect of theatre. Plays—and even productions—can travel between cultures but some plays travel better than others. Seeing this Ekjut production I suspect *Look Back in Anger* does not travel well. Osborne's play was located in a particular place at a particular time, there was a very complicated social context within which its characters did what they did and said what they said but this context just does not come through in this anachronistic Hindi production with its sixties posters and eighties sneakers. Further, the same words in another language may possess different significance. When Anupam Kher's Jimmy Porter speaks of *zindagi, maut aur bewafaee* he sounds like just another filmi character but for Porter to announce 'I knew more about—love. . . betrayal, and death, when I was ten years old than you will probably ever know all your life', was an extraordinary event in English theatre; Jimmy was, in Tynan's phrase, 'the completest young pup' in English literature since Hamlet, he shelved three hundred years of reticence and puritanism that had stiffened the Englishmen. (Need one repeat Eliot's point about the disassociation of sensibility that set in with the Civil War?) In translating plays successfully it is not enough to translate the words, I suspect the entire play has to be relocated in a more accessible social context. An excellent example of this is Majma's *Bichoo* which I recently saw again at the Prithvi though it was not a part of the festival, in which Moliere's comedy is recreated in a world of tattered *nawabi* (*Banne miyan* and *Munne miyan*) and street-wise Punjabis. It was the most enjoyable evening I had ever spent in an Indian theatre.

The artistic success of *Bichoo* brings me to my third point, which concerns the difference between manipulation and direction. An actor uses not just his voice and his body, but his intelligence as well. The question 'How should I play this role?' naturally resolves itself into several hundred smaller questions, eg. 'How should I play this particular scene?' 'How should I say this line?' etc. One sort of answer may be obtained by examining the internal structure of the play (eg. should the character break down now or later?) another sort of answer must be obtained from an actor's observation of the world, of the people the characters are supposed to represent. It is this second sort of observation that becomes difficult when one is putting on a play with foreign characters. It is not just a question of the gestures a man like Willy Loman will make. or even his voice, though both are important, it has to do with the much deeper question of how such a man will reveal himself in his behaviour. That is why it is important for a good actor to possess an empathetic intelligence and a power of observation at least equal to that of a fine novelist. But while few fine novelists would attempt a novel about a people they have not observed for years, or have not grown up amongst, out actors seem to think they can play any sort of people, Russians, Englishmen, Americans. The result is often ham, the director who has seen the country in question on a six-week package tour dictating what to do to actors who aren't as well-travelled as he: manipulation, not direction.

I think I can anticipate how Alyque Padamsee would respond to this. 'If I can watch Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* done by Englishmen in London calling each other Vladimir and Anton,' he had said in the interview, 'then I see no reason not to do *Death of a Salesman* in India with an Indian Willy Loman.' Once again, Padamsee misses the point. For one, many English productions with foreign characters are second-rate, marred for the very reasons I have been advancing. Two, when the English play Chekhov they appropriate Chekhov for themselves though less intelligently than the way Majma appropriated Moliere. Almost invariably ordinary country gentry become silly decadent aristos, bored Russian provincials become English eccentrics, comedy becomes nostalgic elegy.

My last point follows directly from this and it is something that struck me while watching Geoffrey and Laura Kendal playing Alexei Arbuzov's *Old World*. This was good theatre and yet it didn't seem particularly Russian, for my money the two resembled a certain sort of English pair. And yet, I was enjoying myself. Why? The answer was obvious: the Kendals on stage resembled real people. English perhaps, but nonetheless real. The problem with the actors in *Death of a Salesman* was that they resembled no one, they were like nothing on this earth, American, English or Indian. In their desire to be 'universal' they had failed to respond to the famous invitation Jimmy Porter extended not merely to Cliff and Allison but equally to all actors everywhere: 'Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive. . . .'

The Sunday Observer
3 March, 1985

The Subtle Thrashing of Karan Thapar

Who is Karan Thapar, the intelligent reader may well ask, and why should I waste a part of my Sunday morning reading an article about how he was subtly thrashed last Tuesday? To the answers, then: Karan Thapar is one of the most successful Indian journalists in Britain today, as young as he is successful, and as for his thrashing, the reason I inflict it upon you is to demonstrate the extraordinary televisual ability of our youthful Prime Minister, which was once again upon show last Tuesday, when Karan Thapar interviewed Rajiv for Britain's Channel 4.

Their backgrounds are similar enough to be worth remarking on: Both interviewer and interviewee went first to Doon and then to Cambridge, though not at the same time. Rajiv is forty, Thapar twenty-nine. There are other differences, too. Rajiv left Cambridge without a degree after a fairly undistinguished stint: Thapar was elected president of the Cambridge Union and after taking his degree left to do a doctorate in Indian politics at St Anthony's, Oxford. While Rajiv spent several years after university flying planes and being modest about his surname, Thapar wasted no time in getting on: in 1980, at the age of twenty-five he left for Lagos where he served as the London *Times*'s West Africa correspondent.

Subsequently he switched to television becoming a producer-cum-presenter at 'London Weekend World', with a special line in interviewing subcontinental Presidents and Prime Ministers for 'Eastern Eye', the programme he worked on. When I rang him up yesterday to check on these facts, he volunteered an explanation for the switch; 'What really attracted me to TV was the chance to get my ugly mug on screen, which has always been an obsession.'

Well, well. Looking at it that way I don't suppose Thapar could be unhappy with last Tuesday's job. Before they showed the interview we were told that it was shot by a Doordarshan crew, presumably to preempt criticism of a sudden and not very professional jerk of the camera. But however many jerks there were—on or off screen—in this case Doordarshan cannot be accused of bias; when Thapar spoke a scrupulously fair camera showed us his mug and since he did most of the talking there was lot more of Thapar's menacing expressions than Rajiv's *sheetal chehra* (cool face).

The people I was watching television with seemed to mind this: I didn't. I kept marvelling at how this worked to Rajiv's advantage. Here was Thapar practising adversarial television, 'putting' things to Rajiv, trying to 'push' the Prime Minister hither and thither with his long, convoluted questions. 'I want to (pause, Thapar's eyes narrow, he is going in for the kill) *put* something to *you*.' Rajiv, in contrast, was calm, disarming. The net result was that Rajiv looked as if he spent all day at the South Block meditating while the crew-cut Thapar—towards the end of the show—looked like a nervous Moonie who is about to go to jail.

> Thapar: . . .The fact that in your handling of the government, the bureaucracy, the broad strategy of your economic philosophy or even the fine details of your budget, in all of these it seems you have entirely reversed the legacy handed down to you by the last Prime Minister, your mother. Do you accept this?
> Rajiv: No, not at all.
> Thapar: Well, I won't push you. . .

The fact is that Thapar couldn't have pushed him even if he had wanted to. Rajiv seemed a rock in comparison. Of course, Rajiv was helped by the fact that Thapar hadn't done his homework properly.

> T: What further steps is your government taking or going to take to solve the problem (of Punjab)?
> R: (*Smiles.*) Well, I wouldn't tell you on telly.
> T: Well, I know you wouldn't tell me that on telly but let me then push you and ask you, for instance: Are you planning to grant Chandigarh to Punjab as their sole capital?
> R: We've already done that. . .

As a rule I do not care for interviewers who look as if they have set out to score points against those they interview even if that is the chief intention of the exercise. It is a better trick to disarm interviewees, make them comfortable, let them open up, get them talking on a subject that really interests them. Sometimes one got the impression it was Rajiv who was interviewing Thapar, letting him tie himself in knots ('How therefore would you see the glue that stitches India together?'), encouraging him to expose himself and his ignorance:

> T: Many have suggested, and I want to ask you if these are suggestions you are going to implement, that you either institute state funding of political parties and elections or that you legalize all donations to all political parties as a means of cutting this out.

R: We've already legalized donations.
T: This is something you have done recently, is it?
R: Last budget.
T: (*Voice drops.*) Last budget?
R: Well, last parliamentary session.

By this point Mrs Gandhi would have snapped and told the inept interviewer to go home and read the newspapers before he came to interview her. All Rajiv did was to smile and go on speaking gently. It's a brilliant move, and it wins him many friends.

Of course, Rajiv isn't entirely innocent. It is well known that Indo-British relations are at an all time low, that India has, whatever its reasons, 'dropped' Britain. Thapar referred to this and what followed was the coup of the interview, for interviewer and interviewee alike.

T: What would it take to repair fences?
R: (*As if he hasn't seen the bomb blast.*) I don't think we have any problem with the British.

Thapar then mentioned the Westland Helicopter deal and asked if it had anything to do with the Indian government's stand that the British weren't doing enough to muzzle Chohan.

R: No, no no.
T: You categorically deny it?
R: Yes, categorically deny it.

Rajiv's replies were so low voiced it was clear he was being devious, ironic. On record he could hardly say anything else. Yet to the foreign office observers in London who must have switched on their television sets the message was clear.

The ability to perform well on television is only a minor competence, is no sign of greatness. For all I know Rajiv is—and will be—an inefficient Prime Minister. But like ordinary people everywhere we see so little of our Prime Minister at work we are gratified when we see him perform well in public, especially abroad. Will Doordarshan consider showing this interview at home?

Thrashing an experienced mediaman like Karan Thapar on the box is not going to solve India's problems but it will give a lot of joy to the folks back home, especially those like myself who know who Thapar is and otherwise value his work.

The Sunday Observer
14 July, 1985

A Brat's India

India: Labyrinths in the Lotus Land, by Sasthi Brata; William Morrow & Co.; pp. 336; $19.95

I always think it is easier for a glib foreigner to write 'a book about India'. For an Indian, a scrupulous Indian, it's an awesome subject: there is so much of the country, so many different kinds in it. Ideally, one should know every Indian language, have lived in and reflected on every part of India, met and understood most kinds of Indians before one embarks on such a harebrained project. Since that is a tall order indeed I should think at the very least a knowledge of half-a-dozen modern Indian languages, the two major classical languages (Sanskrit, Tamil) combined with ten years of observation and travel throughout the country would be essential.

No such inhibitions seem to have restrained Sasthi Brata. Born and brought up in Calcutta, he left India in his early twenties, worked in London in an engineering firm, chucked up his job, wrote a somewhat acclaimed autobiography at the age of twenty-nine, *My God Died Young* (1968) and has spent the rest of his years in various cities of the West, writing lesser books and journalism. Since 1985 is the 'year of India' (Reagan's phrase) Brata decided to write a book that would tell the American public the truth about India. His publishers, at least, are taking it seriously: the *Indian Express* recently informed us they have nominated it for a Pulitzer Prize.

We may regard Brata as an Indian but it is not so clear that he regards himself as one. In the Author's Note he describes himself 'both a native son and an exile in a foreign land' (p 9). At various points he refers to himself as a 'voluntary exile' (p 7, p 40). In *My God Died Young* he had tried to make his position clear: '. . .India is an authoritarian society. Hence I disown the country of my birth because its ethos is alien to my ways of thought.' But perhaps things aren't that simple, after all; in this book when it suits him, Brata becomes an Indian: 'As an Indian I felt disgust and hatred when intellectuals and novelists such as Michael Foot. . .and Iris Murdoch returned from a freebee junket sponsored by the Indian government, and waxed eloquent about how marvellously "efficient" the country had become (during the Emergency)' (p. 27). Equally, when it suits him, he ditches India: on page 290 he is a 'former Indian' and a few pages later, distancing himself from the Indian journalists, he becomes a disdainful 'Westerner' '. . .the combination of a suppurating conceit with frequent lapses in professional standards leaves the Westerner bemused. At one moment, one tends to be impressed, take the man as an equal. In the very next instant, one discovers that some awful gaffe has been committed, for which a child in its diaper should have been severely smacked on its bottom.' (p 295)

That Brata should think himself an exile is both typical and old hat. 'The exile,' he had written, explaining his predicament in an earlier book 'is always under attack from both sides.' It is a pose, it dramatizes his situation, romanticizes it, and it rests on a loose use of the word. An exile, strictly speaking, is a man who is banished from his land. Brata is an expatriate.

As if 'exile' was not already freighted with enough myths Brata mendaciously chooses to invest it with more, presumably in the hope that this will improve his own image. 'But just as James Joyce had to flee Ireland to write so memorably about Dublin, most prominent sons of Calcutta have sought refuge in exile. Rabindranath Tagore received news of his induction into the Nobelity (Nobel Prize-Winner for Literature in 1913), while on a visit to the United States.'

For one, this is not true. Krishna Kripalani's biography of Tagore tells us that Tagore sailed for India in September 1913 and that he was in Santiniketan on 13 November when he heard the good news. But even if it had been true, if Tagore had returned home in December, not September, it would in no way support Brata's assertion: Tagore was not an exile, nor for that matter was he an expatriate, though he often went abroad.

This posturing, I might add, is not unique to Brata, is commoner in Calcutta than one might suppose.

Calcutta if you must exile me
wound my lips before I go
only words remain and the gentle
touch of your finger
on my lip Calcutta burn my eyes
before I go into the night

Commenting on these lines Keki Daruwalla wrote in 1980: 'What exile is he talking about? Not physical banishment surely. Nobody is throwing Mr Nandy out of Calcutta. The Police Commissioner there is interested in externing only *professional* crooks. What do you do with a contrived poem like that?'

It was the Jains of the *Times of India*, not the Police Commissioner, who finally persuaded India's Rod McKuen to leave Calcutta in order to edit an impressive clutch of magazines. But why did Brata leave? While explaining what Indian marriages are all about, he tells us his story. At Presidency college he had fallen in love with a girl in his class. Her parents did not like him. 'Between us, however, we had firmly agreed that we would get married after I came down from the university.'

The girl tried stalling the inevitable arranged marriage but 'her mother threatened suicide and her father proposed to disinherit her . . . if she did not do their bidding'. Under 'constant and coercive pressure' she agreed. But she kept the news a secret from Brata as she did not wish to 'upset me while I was preparing for my finals'.

On the last day of his examinations she came to see him. They drove out into the country 'petting and kissing more daringly than we had ever done before'. For over two hours he talked about his hopes and dreams, what they would do after they got married.

When he dropped her in town at the end of the day she told him she was going to get married in a week's time and sprinted away in the dark. 'Four days later,' writes Brata, 'I left Calcutta, not wishing to be in the vicinity of such vicious cruelty.'

What a terrible country! What terrible people! That is what Brata wants us to think. But there is something suspiciously pat about the story, it has the easy indignation and cheap pathos of a Hindi film story: sad hero, poor girl, bad world. Boo hoo.

Luckily, the story of this affair is told in *My God Died Young*, except it's a very different story there, much more believable.

Sasthi was in love with Apu and one day he kissed her lightly on her cheeks. She cried. Later she wrote him a letter: 'When I first learnt of your true feelings towards me, I was grieved rather than surprised that you should make such an unfortunate mistake.' It was a mistake because a husband had already been chosen for her, though she had not been formally engaged.

After an exchange of furious letters in which he 'invoked Marx, Hegel and Plekhanov' and she 'retorted with the *Ramayana*, Ibsen and Gandhi' they met again and decided that she should not marry the man her parents had chosen for her. 'Given a goal, Indian women are able to achieve it with more devious cunning than the rest of the female species. . . . Immediately she proceeded to rid herself of the insistent parasite.'

The other man withdrew. 'At last Apu was free.'

They met in secret, in cafes with curtained cubicles where young couples would grope after they had tipped the waiter handsomely. They took boxes in the cinema. She gave him Ibsen, he gave her Camus. 'I wrote for her, lived for her.' She wrote to him: 'I feel I need you as much as you need me.'

But, as Brata noted sagely, 'It is easier to be mean and human than forgiving and godly.' He often fought with her and then kept away for weeks. 'We came together, of course. But each separation left its mark. It was always I who caused the rifts; she who pleaded reconciliation. She pandered to my vanity; I experienced no strain. She felt uncertain and lonely. . . . In abandoning the world of her parents Apu needed a new anchor, I was too self-engrossed to provide her with one.'

She wrote to him: 'There must be some fundamental discord in our relationship which threatens rupture. . . .You have never actually loved me for myself—you love an image.'

Sometime later there was a tram strike in Calcutta. The two met on the street, each walking in a different direction. 'Words were useless...I touched her hand. It was cold. We sat on a park bench. . . I tried to kiss her. She drew away. . . I started to taunt her. Silently tears rolled down her face. . . She sat there in the dark, draped in a sari, tearful, loving silent.'

He got up. As he walked away, he yelled at her: 'I don't want to see you, ever.'

Two days later she wrote to him: 'We shouldn't have met and we won't in the future. . . I have decided my future. I intend to get married at the earliest opportunity. I understand there are several candidates—all England-returned engineers with good prospects—the incarnation of social success. I have to pick one of them; it really does not matter whom, they are all alike, wonderfully. Naturally they want me for my money and I want snug security, the only thing you cannot offer.'

He met her again and learnt that she had returned home after their last meeting 'on the verge of a breakdown'. She had shut herself in her room and cried till her tears ran dry. In the early hours of the morning her father had forced his way in '. . . he had tried to make her see the folly of associating with an, "irresponsible cad" like me'. The father had suggested she marry someone else. Apu had agreed. She was now engaged.

Apu met him after the examinations. They went to the country, had unsuccessful sex. As he was dropping her home she told him she was getting married in a week.

It's still a sad story but there is no 'vicious cruelty' that Brata seemed to impute to India, the social system and the girl's parents. It is a story of youth and foolishness and it says a lot about Brata, little about India. That was the 1968 account. But by 1985 the posturing, the self-mythologizing and the misuse of words ('vicious cruelty') have taken over.

Somehow I doubt if Brata actually left Calcutta exactly four days later: it *sounds* bogus.

The moral carelessness of the book is of a piece with its linguistic carelessness. Brata uses adjectives freely but the adjective isn't the only enemy to his nouns: too often, Brata himself is. Consider the following:

> p 19: 'There is a famous temple called *Lingaraj* (the exact transliteration would be "Kingprick"). . .' Translation, ***not*** transliteration.
>
> p 116: 'The dramatic invocation "Let them eat cake" did not generate the French Revolution. . . .' Reply, possibly instruction, *not* invocation.
>
> p 199: 'Calcutta is an exact epigraphy of this fascinating and ambivalent terrain.' *Epigraphy?* What does he mean?

The mythologizing is crucial to this book, especially when it comes to Calcutta which is dealt with in a chapter called 'Black Hole and Bubbling Brilliance' '*The bhadralok* (civilized gentleman) in Calcutta is the most assiduously complex city man in the world.' (p 98)

(On Mir Jafar's deal with Clive) 'It was in Calcutta that India was humiliated as she had never been before.' (p 103)

'Like arterial veins branching out from the heart, Calcutta pumps out life-giving fluid to the rest of the country.' (p 116) ***Really! In 1985!***

Not surprisingly, therefore, Brata's 'truth' about India is reduced to the facile paradoxes of tourist literature: 'India is still teeming and far flung, noisy and filthy. But it is also challenging its own past for the first time, and stretching its limbs toward the future.' (p 84)

'Kipling's adage about East and West never meeting may have been true in his time. But India is living proof that civilizations can cross-fertilize, that astronauts and *sadhus* can live on the same planet, and if not on the same street, then at least within bicycling distance of each other.' (p 87)

'Nothing is quite what it seems and magic might well explain what India is all about.' (p 84)

Well might magic, for Brata doesn't.

In *A Traitor to India* (1976) Brata had included an account of his wedding in St Saviours Church, Hampstead. Six months after the wedding his mother was on her death bed. Brata went back to Calcutta to see her. She died three days before he got there. His elder brother asked if he was going to observe *ashauj*, the mourning period.

> 'Of course I could have joined in the circus. . . But there was one signal difference between a church wedding and the keeping of *ashauj*. . . .On the former occasion I had worn a Savile Row suit, imbibed large quantities of alcohol throughout the day. . . . On the latter occasion, if I agreed to be part of the performance, I would have to be dressed as a mendicant clown, nurse an empty belly and mumble Sanskrit mantras for hours on end. . .'

Is one supposed to laugh or cry? Here is a recent commentator placing in context behaviour like Brata's:

> 'The Westerner mostly meets anglicized Indians who have absorbed a great deal of Occidental mores. Although the tensions are concealed just beneath the surface, the projected persona is usually one of grace, sophistication, and an acceptance of those very norms that the Indian's deep atavistic yearnings have taught him to spurn. The histrionic farce lasts for so long, and no longer. Then he explodes, because he does not know how to deal with the turbulent subterranean churnings of his own "collective unconscious".
>
> The natural inclinations of his psyche push him one way, his borrowed clothes and his adopted Western manners shove him in another. In moments of stress or unwary abandon, what the Westerner finally observes is a flood of violent vomit, because the authentic stomach has refused to accept the foreign food that has been injected into it.'

Of course, it's Brata himself in this new book (p 131-2). In a sense, he is correct. He is describing a certain kind of reaction when East and West combine superficially, describing a certain kind of Indian of which he is but an exaggerated version.

But that is not the only kind of Indian there is and Brata's generalizations are just plain wrong. 'The intellectual "barrow boy" solution of taking the best from East and West the cerebral copout in attempting to integrate elements from diametrically opposed camps, is at best pathetic, at worst explosively dangerous.' If you believe that kind of bosh, read the book. You'll probably think it a masterpiece.

The Sunday Observer
8 December 1985

Just a Simple Band

The Shakespeare Wallah: The Autobiography of Geoffrey Kendal, with Clare Colvin; Sidgwick & Jackson; pp. 186; $12.95

We open in Ven-ice
We next play Ve-ro-na
Then on to Cre-mo-na
(Lotsa-laughs in Cremona)
Our next stop is Pal-ma
That heartless artless menace
Then Mantua
And Padua
Then we open again in—
(all) *WHERE?*
'Well let me see now I've got a map. Let's pick out some place.'
'Yeah just don't take it too far down the line.'
'Oh let's take the first canyon outta here-'
'Matter of fact it we hurry we can beat the tab, the sheriff's out there looking for us. . . '

I think I was thirteen when I first saw the Kendals put on *Shakespearana* at my school.Of course I had heard of them, even seen their daughter Felicity play on the West End opposite Alan Badel in *Kean*; But now in the Senior Mess I was impressed by the bareness of their stage, by the economy of their costume and property, more than that, by the marvellous ease with which they wandered through adult life, just like characters Cole Porter would have invented. I remember making up some story that would enable me to go backstage and meet the two. It must be a great bore being bothered by pests after a performance but they did not show their boredom, were polite, interested and interesting, qualities Kendal has successfully brought to this marvellous memoir.

They had not always wandered with ease. As we learn from this book, lugging actors and property around India—travelling, sometimes, for four days in trains—is not easy. ('It was quite usual to travel five hundred miles from one venue to the next.') By the time I got to see them though, they had stopped punishing themselves so. Their daughter, Jennifer, had married Shashi Kapoor and settled down; their younger daughter, Felicity, had stayed on in England after the success of her first film, *Shakespearewallah*. 'Without our daughters, I had rather lost heart in getting half-a-dozen actors from place to place, organising their lives and luggage and bookings, sorting out artistic disputes. After Felicity left, Marcus (Murch) stayed with us for a few years. When he decided to set up a theatre company in Delhi, we decided we would travel light—just the two of us.'

Kendal begins the book remarking on his affinity with India. 'I was thirty before I set eyes on the subcontinent, yet it is the only place where I feel I really belong. Strange, because I went there purely by chance.' *Purely* by chance? True, he was born and brought up in Kendal in the Lake District (his surname was Bragg), the son of a clerk in a woollen mill, but there was always a connection with the subcontinent. His father's sister Eunice left home and went to India where she married an Anglo-Indian engine driver called Harry. They settled in Ambala where for years she would await the mail train; as it passed by their house Harry would hoot twice on the whistle. His mother's brother Jack joined the Royal Horse Artillery in India; for years he was merely 'a faded picture against bamboo furniture' but he did come home and tell young Geoffrey tales of Agra and Fatehpur Sikri.

But whatever he may feel for India, theatre was his first and true love. In Form 3b at his grammar school in Kendal, Geoffrey fell in love. Sir Frank Benson and his touring company came to town with the *Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar:*

> 'Never will I forget the first night in St George's Hall, an old horseshoe-like theatre with an antiquated roller curtain with advertisements painted on it. Behind that curtain there was a new world born to me that night, a world of romance of wonderful people who seemed like gods. The Actors: such handsome, defiant men and such lovely ladies. I think I grew up that night. Walking home I felt ten feet tall. From then on and until today, the theatre has been real for me and the world has been somehow make believe.'

At the age of nineteen he joined a repertory company where his first words—in a play set in Egypt, *The Green Cord*—were 'Whisky soda, *lao*.' 'No one knew that the last word was Hindi,' writes Kendal, 'and no one knew or asked why we should be using Hindi in Egypt. What '*Shon Jepek djinbek*' means I have not the foggiest notion either, and it was no use asking, as obviously neither did anyone else; but I suppose it sounded romantic and foreign, and I said it with gusto.'

When he married Laura (whom he met in a touring company) he decided to launch his own company. The Depression had just set in and despite the fun and camaraderie it was a hard time they had.The war saved them and brought them to India.

Kendal signed up as an engineer for the Merchant Navy but soon enough found himself with the Entertainment National Service Association (ENSA). In the troopship D6 they travelled to India. As they came into Bombay for the first time, 'I felt a surge of excitement, a sort of heightened quality of life. The crowds had an energy I had never seen in Britain, restlessly flowing to and fro, as if the smallest incident was of vast interest, watching and taking everything in. Later I was to find this same quality in an Indian audience—they really are the best in the world; nothing escapes their attention.' With ENSA they performed eighty-six shows in just over six months travelling to Shillong, Darjeeling, Assam, Calcutta, Peshawar, Quetta, Karachi and back to Bombay.

Back in England in 1946 Kendal dreamt of schemes that would get him back to India. One day someone in India House told him that an official from the state of Hyderabad, one Nawab Zain Yar Jung was in town. He suggested it would be better to contact the state governments than the departments in Delhi. It worked. 'Within a month we had invitations to Hyderabad, Patiala, Gwalior, Travancore and Cochin. . . Our Shakespearana Company was born.' They toured India for a year-and-a-half.

In 1953 they were back in India and stayed in the East, travelling as far as Borneo but mostly here, for seventeen years till 1969. Between June 1953 and December 1956 Shakespearana gave 879 performances of *Othello, The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, The Taming of the Shrew, Macbeth* and the odd Shaw and Wilde. Utpal Dutt, Marcus Murch and Shashi Kapoor joined them straight from school; Kapoor went on to marry their elder daughter. James Ivory and Ismail Merchant made a film about the Kendals which won international acclaim but it did not please them. Tony Buckingham, the Kendal figure, was 'the hammest of the hams I thought! This film was not about us, but concerned some travelling showmen to whom we bore no resemblance. It is clear to me now why they approached the film as they did. The actors were seen as the last of the British Raj, hanging on to a dying culture in an out-of-date medium, while the cinema, representing modern India, took on with its new vital power. For Laura and me it was difficult and at times painful to go along with the premise of the film.'

That was in 1963. Twenty-three years later, the Kendals are still at it, though they have reduced the pace of their touring and come to India only for short trips. What a remarkable life! On page 59 right in the middle of this wonderful book appears Geoffrey Kendal's credo, a passage our upper middle classes—all those smart public school boys who applauded *Shakespearana* while at school and their dressy wives—would do well to contemplate:

> 'All my life people have asked me when I am going to settle down—meaning, I suppose, when I am going to stop wandering round the world and start being a respectable citizen with a house, an insurance policy, and all other things of possession and importance that this fear struck world seems to think necessary. I evade the question. It would be no use answering truthfully, as in most cases, my questioner would not understand and would no doubt think I was being airy fairy, or mad, or both. The truth is, I have "settled down". It happened when I was twenty, and I have been fully settled ever since. That was when I found all in the world I could possibly want, in just being an actor and being privileged to play in the greatest plays that have ever been written.'

No, I don't think this fear-struck world can understand. Jennifer Kendal once said 'We were the first hippies', a remark her father misunderstands when he protests, 'We were not because whenever we got off the train we were immaculately dressed.' Funny he should have missed her point.

A troupe of strolling players are we
Not stars like L B Mayer's are we
But just a simple band
Who roam around the land
Dispensing fol-de-rol frivolity.

The Sunday Observer
15 June,1986

Portrait of the Artist as Polymath

There are so many Sagars. It's difficult to know where to begin. First, Sagar the canny operator. No sooner have I entered the studios of the *Ramayana* at Umbergaon and settled by the video monitor than Ramanand Sagar turns to me and asks conspiratorially: 'You know this Pritish Nandy?' I nod yes: say he's a friend. I am nervous. Pritish Nandy's *Illustrated Weekly* has recently carried an unflattering cover story on the television serial Sagar is directing. I expect a volley of abuse.

Instead, Sagar chuckles:

> 'This Pritish thought he was very smart but I outsmarted him, *Sala,* he asked me for an interview. I thought: Pritish Nandy *kya karega* Ramayana *ko le ke?* (what does Pritish Nandy have to do with the *Ramayana?*) He has to sell his magazine, he will go for an attack. So I refused an interview. I said, "*Jo likhna hai tumhen, tum likho,* (write whatever you want) don't expect me to cooperate with you."
>
> Then Pritish tried another tactic: he got one sardar to approach me with a false name. I suspected *daal mein kuchh kaala hai* (there was something amiss) and I kept him waiting. Then a girl from some other publication began telephoning me asking me for an interview in Delhi. I grew suspicious. I said to her: I am very busy in the day, I just cannot meet you. She said she would meet me at any time. So I said: I will only be free at two a.m. Meet me then. She agreed. I knew Pritish *ki koi chaal is mein hain* (had a hand in this). Which respectable girl will agree to meet me at two o'clock at night?
>
> Then I made my enquiries and when I found out *ke* Pritish *ka issue* press *mein hai* I then called the girl and the sardar for the interview.'

He chuckles loudly, really pleased with himself. 'Tell Pritish I know all the journalist's tricks. Before Partition I was news editor of the *Milap* in Lahore.'

Then, Sagar the romantic. The four page typed bio-data Sagar hands out to visiting journalists begins thus: 'God opened his box of colours and with his creative brush of imagination painted the beautiful vale of Kashmir a paradise of earth. In this romantic Valley every soul breathed the fragrance of the nobility of pure love. Having been born there Ramanand Sagar thus inherited immortal love and has ever since been termed as a romantic writer.'

But it isn't just poetry and a box of colours. Essential to the romantic is the view of oneself as a hobo. In this Ramanand Sagar (born Ramanand Chopra) is part of a tradition, which includes folk heroes like Bob Dylan and Pritish Nandy. Nandy used to tell of the days when as a dropout, he made a living selling *chai* on railway stations. Dylan (born Robert Zimmerman, the son of a Duluth dentist) arrived in New York in the early sixties full of stories about how he had sung his way with Woody Guthrie through the dust bowl.

Sagar's 'bio-data' continues: 'Ramanand entered the arch and life in a humble fashion as a goldsmith's apprentice. Standing alone under the deep shadow of the tall arch, little did he dream of what Fate had in store for him. It was a long and difficult path he traversed—truck cleaner, soap-vendor, typist, editor. . . .'

Seventy years ago Sagar was born in Kashmir; the Chopras were Punjabi *lalas* who traded in salt. Originally from Peshawar they had settled in the valley at least two generations before Ramanand entered the arch and life. Sagar is particularly proud of his grandfather, Lala Shankar Das, after whom he tells you a *chowk* in Srinagar is named.

After such security, Sagar will let you know he is no simple bourgeois. Though his parents lived in Srinagar he had been 'adopted' by his maternal relatives in Lahore where he followed the family trade and became a goldsmith's apprentice.

One day Sagar suddenly ran away from this tepid world. 'I fought over dowry. I was engaged to marry someone—it was to be an arranged marriage. Then suddenly my grandparents said I should marry someone else. Because they would give a good dowry. I said *nahin yaar* this is not right. I ran away.'

Sagar the rebel earned his way doing odd jobs, and all these occupations the bio-data tells us 'made him conscious of the overtones of life itself'. Sagar is a great believer in the hidden hand of circumstance which—he believes—has been constantly shaping him these seventy years in order to make him the fit instrument to reveal God on Doordarshan. 'I felt my childhood was very suppressed,' he said *sotto voce*. 'Maybe it was essential to make me this emotional. I felt nature was trying to mould me.'

Back to the bio-data: 'In the middle of this grim struggle, which he was facing gallantly, tragedy struck.' Like the young Keats Sagar was hit by tuberculosis.

Keats went to Rome, Sagar to Gulmarg. The consumptive Keats could not bear to open a book. 'It's the most difficult thing in the world to write a letter,' he complains from his deathbed above Piazza Espagna, 'I have an habitual feeling of my real life having passed, and that I am leading a posthumous existence.' Sagar was braver, more optimistic. He wrote *The Diary of a TB Patient.*

The bio-data tells us: 'He dreamed of a life which would unfold all the beauties nature withheld. He realized the uselessness of his life in not being able to serve humanity. The writer in him had outgrown the man. He now had a pen to lead men to tread on the noble path of love. God had no right to snatch him from his fellowmen. God lost that battle. Sagar the writer triumphed to lead us on to love.' Then Sagar the film-maker. After a partition novel *Aur Insaan Mar Gaya* (And Humanity Died) Sagar decided to move on. 'Spring splashed its colours. The writer dipped his pen in the nectar of his heart.' Sagar wrote the story and screenplay for Raj Kapoor's *Barsaat* (1950). Tempted by its success, Sagar produced his very own film the next year. *Mehmaan* (1951) marked the birth of the Sagar banner.

It was the size of the cinema audiences that proved seductive. Writing went to the wall. 'In India if I portray my thoughts in a book,' he once said, 'the readership is limited to few blessed educated masses who already can think for themselves due to their scholastic grinding.' For the next twenty years, Sagar wrote the screenplays and dialogue for over twenty-five films. But it was *Ghunghat* (1961) and finally *Arzoo* (1965) that really won Sagar his reputation as a film-maker.

Arzoo was an adaptation of the Cary Grant-Deborah Kerr film, *An Affair* to *Remember*. 'Performances by Rajendra Kumar, Sadhana and Feroze Khan together with a memorable music score by Shankar Jaikishen and the film became one of the alltime hits with silver jubilees in sixteen centres. It was the official Indian entry at festivals at Moscow, Sydney and even Tashkhent where it won the Best Story award.'

Around the time he fled Lahore, Chopra became Sagar. 'Are you reading the series *Hind Samachar* are doing on me?' He asked excitedly. I nodded in the negative. 'Oh, well, last week they told a famous story about how I got my name Sagar. They said when I came to Bombay I went to the seaside *aur samundar ke kinare maine jhuk ke kaha: "he de-*

vta mujhe sweekar karo." Aur samundar ki ek lahar aayi aur Ramanand Chopra Ramanand Sagar ban gaya' (and I bent beside the sea-shore and said, "O Lord accept me." And a wave of the sea came towards me and Ramanand Chopra became Ramanand Sagar). But Sagar says he cannot recall this ever happening. He adds modestly, 'I don't know where the legend began.'

Then, Sagar the scholar. All along nature had been moulding him for his supreme task. Ever since 1950 every Sunday four or five friends—Sagar, Anil Biswas, Prof F. Chandrakant Pande, Mahesh Kaul and a Hindi poet called Pandit Narinder Sharma used to meet where Prof Pande would recite to them different versions of the *Valmiki Ramayana, Kamban,* and many others. They used to meet at Anil Biswas's home. Then in 1968 when Sagar moved to Juhu they would congregate at his place.

'When I look back,' Sagar says smugly, 'I know nature was moulding me for a certain epic work. I had been soaked.'

Next, Sagar the pioneer. People approached Sagar to do the *Ramayana* on film. He demurred. 'Film would be two-and-a-half hours, three hours long. I would not be able to do justice to the *Ramayana*. So I waited for video technology to come along. In the seventies video technology was available. So I thought, now *Ramayana* can be given to the people. Like people keep books they can keep my videos.'

Sagar invested in the printing of a single sheet brochure. It advertised, 'A colossal serial with a noble myth of 15 hours. . .this emotional film serial is being produced at a cost of Rs one crore (hundred million). This masterpiece will be treasured by all those who treasure true worth.'

'I was just canvassing the markets,' Sagar says. 'I sent out the brochure to all sorts of institutions. Mostly religious *sansthas* hoping to raise money. But nobody put in any money,' he adds ruefully. 'Maybe they were right. They thought: Me *filmi* person. . .I thought the world needs my *Ramayana*, but maybe the world did not think that way.'

Then Sagar, the dogged fighter. In 1985 Sagar finally got his *Ramayana* break. In a public speech, Rajiv Gandhi once thought aloud and wondered why epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* could not be screened on Doordarshan. The secretary of the information and broadcasting ministry, S.S. Gill, was quick on the mark. He had apparently heard of Sagar's Sunday sessions and invited him to do an epic rendition of the epic.

For a year the project got delayed 'mysteriously', Sagar tells you with an ominous look on his face. So for the length of 1986, Sagar had to cool his heels. But once the project was passed it was Sagar who got the better of Doordarshan.

Realizing he was on to a popular thing Sagar began dragging his feet. The contract he had signed explicitly said he had to bring Ram back to Ayodhya and crown him in fifty-two episodes. Sagar didn't see why his art should be limited by a mere contract.

After the sixth episode was delivered Sagar received the first complaint from Doordarshan. In this episode Ram and Sita first see each other in the *Pushpavatika*. No words are exchanged but the two look at each other meaningfully for four minutes and thirty-five seconds while we hear a song in the background.

> *Ek dooje ko*
> *Dekhat man bhaye*
> *Ram Siya mein*
> *Siya Ram mein*
> *Ek hi roop paaye*
>
> (The togetherness of Ram and Sita is a sight to behold. Their transmigration of selves proves their oneness in form.)

Doordarshan was less satisfied and told Sagar this unnecessary stretching was not on. That very week 'by complete coincidence' Sagar says he received a letter from a top scholar and critic, Dr Dharma Vir Bharati which in particular commended Ramanand Sagar's depiction of the encounter in the *Pushpavatika*. 'He said what you have done no other writer could have done. I am strictly following masters. Correct?'

The reason Sagar could get away with this was simple. While the contract required him to deliver each episode at least four weeks before it was to be screened, Sagar often delivered an episode *one day* before it was to go on the air. In consequence Sagar could not be asked to change anything.

But why was he allowed to get away with the late delivery? 'Sagar's got us by the short hairs,' Bhaskar Ghosh complained when I put this to him. Did the director general of Doordarshan think Sagar was deliberately slowing down the pace? 'It's not a question of what I think. It's what millions of Indians know. The serial was supposed to end in January and in December we still haven't got to the battle between Ram and Ravana. It seems clear it is being dragged on for commercial reasons. Sagar knows there will be a riot in the country if we stop the *Ramayana.*'

At one point Doordarshan tried to penalize Sagar for the late delivery of episodes. Sagar was informed that for every episode delivered late he would have to pay a penalty of Rs 2.25 lakhs i.e. one and a half times the amount the sponsor pays Doordarshan to broadcast the episode. It didn't work. Sagar told Doordarshan that the contract didn't contain a penalty clause—and he was right.

So Sagar fought for—and got—his extension. But Ghosh told me he would write in a penalty clause into the contract for the extension. In addition he said he had plans to make sure Sagar did not take Doordarshan for another ride. 'If a certain point in the story is not reached by the tenth episode of the extension I am prepared to sack Sagar, terminate his contract. Obviously that means I shall have to have an alternative producer up my sleeve.'

When I visited Umbergaon I informed Sagar of Ghosh's intentions. The holy star around his eyes vanished. 'I don't think he will be so foolish,' Sagar said. 'That is a bureaucrat's reaction to failure. They should respect what I'm doing: *Nahin yaar,* he's right, he's done a great job. Instead this is a sahib babu reaction: *hamara hukum kyon nahin chala?* (why haven't they obeyed my order?) If they try to stop the *Ramayana* there will be a revolt in this country.'

Then there's Sagar the religious man. Sagar's voice grows humble when he speaks of religion or even this massive project God has entrusted him with. 'I take no credit.' he says softly. 'It is all in His hands. Nothing can create such a phenomenon as my *Ramayana.* There must be something to it. It can't be just a matter of art and commerce.'

He is particularly touched by a letter a swami has written him in Sanskrit. He translated it for my benefit. 'Look, this swamiji says "*Jab tak sooraj chand rahega, Ramanand tera naam rahega.*" ' (Ramanand, your name will be remembered till the time the sun and the moon exist.)

I ask him what his religious leanings are. 'I believe in God,' he replies. Fine, but is he a Hindu? Yes. But then Sagar moves into theological ecumenism. '*Main Arya Samaj mein paida hua hoon. Woh bhi maanta hoon.*' (I was born in the Arya Samaj. I believe in that too.) Then he tells me of his MA in Persian which he says gave him the opportunity to read the Koran in Arabic. 'All the colours come in the spectrum to produce the white light. I don't think I have reached that stage quite but I am trying.'

But who are his particular gods? Hanuman, of course, 'He is the helping God.' What about Rama? And Krishna? Sagar maintains an unrelenting silence on this point. It is perhaps the most diplomatic thing to do.

And finally, there's Sagar the secularist. Ever since Ajit Panja got up in Parliament and said the *Ramayana* is a secular serial Sagar has been saying much the same thing. 'Basically I have dealt with only human values, humanism, spiritual values, spiritualism.' It is that old ecumenism bordering on confusion. Then suddenly, when you least expect it, comes the bombshell. 'Now all Muslims and Christians are fully in line as fans of *Ramayana*.' *In line?* Whatever can he mean?

Sunday
24-30 January, 1988

Ritwik Ghatak

Death and rumour have combined to invest the name with a strange glamour but it is still virtually impossible to see his films in India. Six years ago at the age of fifty Ritwik Ghatak died in Calcutta, a figure particularly amenable to the pat clichés journalism reserves for the tortured Bohemian: passionate, derelict, adventurous, frustrated, ravaged by drink and frankly bewildered by the disintegrating world around him. But all this is incidental colour; what matters is that with the possible—and important—exception of Satyajit Ray he is our best filmmaker ever.

International recognition of the fact is around the corner. A Swiss critic, Jean Luc Brossard is preparing a book on him. After last year's screening of *Ajantrik* (1958) in New York, an American critic named it one of the best ten films of 1981. Earlier this year in July as a part of the Festival of India in London the British National Film Theatre (NFT) screened the first ever retrospective of seven of Ghatak's eight films. (Sadly, a print of his penultimate film *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (1973) made in Bangladesh for a Bangladeshi producer was unavailable.)

The response was astounding. 'It's not always that the retrospective of a relatively unknown director fills houses,' says Ken Wlaschin, programme director of the NFI. 'Even our first retrospectives of Howard Hawks and Güney—who won this year's Golden Palm at Cannes—were poorly attended.' In all there were thirteen screenings of the Ghatak films between 19 and 31 July and a ticket for any was a relatively rare commodity.

Indeed so successful was the season that Wlaschin has already announced a rerun of the retrospective in December. Requests for the retrospective have been pouring in from, among other places, the Hague and Scandinavia, and Derek Hill, the foreign films buyer of British television's new Channel 4 is rumoured to be angling for a couple of Ghatak films. Along with Gance's *Napoleon*, the Ghatak *oeuvre* seems set to be among the great rediscoveries of the eighties on the international film circuit.

It was international acclaim not local success that encouraged Ray to continue his career as a film-maker. But for Ghatak even that was denied. Pam Cullen, the films officer at the Indian High Commission in London, who was largely responsible for arranging this retrospective recalls when she first took note of Ghatak: 'It was only in the mid-seventies when Ray at his first John Player lecture here said he thought Ghatak was by far the most significant of the undiscovered Indian directors that we first pricked up our ears. He was just a name; none of us had seen any of his films.'

Careless official patronage must take part of the blame; Ghatak's own monumental disorganization and bad luck are responsible for the rest. *Ajantrik,* Ghatak's classic study of a relationship between a taxi driver and his vehicle was sent to the 1959 London Film Festival but was not shown owing to a lack of screening time. (During his lifetime only one other film of his, *Bari Theke Paliye* (1959), the story of a runaway's adventures in Calcutta, was sent abroad to a festival.) And in a crass decision at the 1959 Venice Film Festival *Ajantrik* was vetoed at the selection stage. It was, however, shown (without subtitles) at a special screening where George Sadoul, the celebrated French Marxist critic, seems to have been the only one to have seen it. He was enthusiastic about it and subsequently included Ghatak in his classic film catalogues. But beyond that Ghatak made no impression.

It was the 1978 Madras Film Festival where five of Ghatak's features were screened in appalling prints that whetted the international appetite. By now there was some demand for his films, both abroad and here but decent prints were unavailable. (His first feature *Nagarik* (1952) was first released in 1977 after a damaged print was salvaged from near oblivion, edited, and a new sound track added.) And where prints were available disputes surrounded the rights.

Legend has it that Ghatak would sell ten per cent of the movie he was working on for two bottles of whisky. Not surprisingly, therefore, total claims for some of the films added to more than hundred per cent. For the past few years the West Bengal Government has been busy buying the contentious rights in an attempt to make a fresh release of the films possible. Last year *Ajantrik* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara,* arguably his two best films, were screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as a part of Film India, the Museum's marathon festival of Indian films. And now from New York to London.

Soon after its completion almost every one of Ghatak's films had been released in Calcutta where Ghatak seems to have been a coterie pleasure. But none of the films was ever commercially screened outside Calcutta, not even in rural Bengal. The consequent commercial failure rebounded on Ghatak: for nearly ten years after *Subarnarekha* (1965), the last of his grand trilogy about the refugees from Bangladesh, no one could be found who was willing to produce a Ghatak feature. It was in this period that he worked, at first as vice-principal and later as a visiting lecturer, at the Film Institute at Pune where several directors of the next generation came under his spell. (It is, however, a testament to his unique style, and vision, that no 'Ghatak school' has emerged from that following.)

Viewing Ghatak's seven features in succession this summer one was struck by Ghatak's uniqueness in cinema. All the devices that are now his trademarks: his use of 180 degree shots from anxious man to indifferent nature opposite, his frequently immobile camera, and his expressionist use of wide angle close-ups to establish his characters in their environment.

It was harsh and uneven perhaps but then his themes were harsh and archetypal, not realist but real. He was often accused of unsubtlety and melodrama. To one such accuser he once answered: 'Son of a pig that you are, you are bound to think so. It is the right and privilege of the artist to take the leap from the ridiculous to the sublime. That's what I have done and I'm sure I have succeeded.' The Festival of India retrospective is merely the latest confirmation of Ghatak's confidence.

India Today
15 November, 1987

The Conservative as Litterateur

I. POETRY

Dhiren Bhagat took to poetry as a child. He wrote poetry throughout his school years and then at Oxford where he received considerable recognition. Before his death he had compiled a selection of English epigrams which is to be published shortly.

The Blind Boy

I do not know what vision is,
I know not if it is a bliss,
Perhaps, when sight comes to me,
I shall clap my hands in glee,
And I will have got,
What I wanted a lot.
I shall earnestly thank Thee,
For the long wanted gift—given to me.

And O, you fellow guys
Live in such paradise,
And say, 'come out in the open,
And get a token,
Of reward
From God.'

Only the kind,
Will not remind
Me, of my handicap
But let me try to fill the gap
With talents that He did provide,
When light to me He hath denied.

1966, Mayoor Magazine, Mayo College
Written when Dhiren was
eight years old

The Death of Bapuji

It is no longer the same
After it went and came
The death:
The death of the father of all,
Who in his heart bore humanity's call.

The very tragic event did claim
A commonfelt sadness and pain;

Every true Indian heart broken
Tears shed in the open.

It was a great revenge
Prompted by a passion to avenge
Feelings of sheer love and hate,
Carved a nation's orphaned fate.

1967, Mayoor Magazine, Mayo College
Written when Dhiren was
nine years old

a sort of hindu sonnet

in front of me cities rise,
poets now travel in motor cars;
i walk. what more can be said
of humility? thrice a day
i think of death. they say
it will make me less attached.

rows of temples are being built—
i make my rounds. a bride-to-be visits
her in-laws for the first time,
is cautious though resigned, knows that
this is where she will die,
still secretly wants to live.

the bridal nervousness is all round me
i cannot decide, i cannot decide. . .

Epigrams for Various Women

Why, Amanda, walk you so gawkily
Your neat bum such a warped sight?

Which brute Etonian crept between
Your legs last night?

And why, Amanda, walk you so gaily
Bra-less yet with tits tight?
Prosperous melons soonest fall
In quiet night.

Summer will come and Amanda will go.
Brilliant light makes me uncouth.
In the lamp's eye all I tongue is
Wit's bitter tooth.

* * *

Now Susannah wakes: in the pond
—Held fast by her rival spell—
Each lotus will snub the sun:

* * *

At the end of another evening
We rush through our conversations
Like late trains singing quick songs.

Three Epigrams for Yasmin

I
Writing in the lamp's eye
Watered by this smaller sun
How distant to recall now
The heated body of a flower:
To know your folded virtue dear
Must Poets read Botany?

II
Though the Ancients knew the windings of Fate
Fascination may explain why Man fell.
Alone, neither here nor there, I await
Your letter on Limbo, Heaven and Hell.

III
I know your eyes—black rings of Swiss tunnel—
Are merely entrances to Agonies
And the rattle of trains through a hill's dark mind.
No, I will not enter, not I!

In the Examination Hall

Minds alive, buzzes with flies;
Open the mouth: one comes out.

Black bit of restlessness
Supported by six thin legs.

In quiet motion the front legs shake:
The fly is on the make.

1980, The New Oxford Magazine, *No.1*
Trinity

From *Letters, Reports etc.*

16. xii. 79

Movement is loveless. Light runs through red curtain
and flowers paint petals on a listless wind.
When things are what they are there are no colours.
In staid tenancy the table browns the space
It occupies, yet, truly, nothing withers.

Existence makes no enquiries: the wind
unasked, unasking, suffers the impressions
of sixteen petals on its flaccid shape.
Everything is identical with itself
and the light that runs red, probes nothing.

(There is the stubborn prince in his frowzy castle
whose breath shifts webs and of whose passion
the owls and mice have intimation:
will never lift his lids for fear of waking
a blackness resident in creation.)

And the thin bowl in which the flowers sing
their silence, recalls a perfect circle
(not the wild pulse of a Giotto throbbing
to perfection, but a studied Zen achievement)
bound, and binding; without distinct from within.

Even shapelessness enters vacancy.
And in the air that crowded through the window
rest lies and hopes and words of malice
dissolved in a just solution
undisturbed by the visiting wind.

* * *

Here giving is the wildest gesture: it is
imagination's perversity
to suppose flowers thrown from a hill
are accepted by some shallow valley
because they fall. Where receipt is absent

Gift is impossible, becomes but a crazed
motion of the arms, straw's whispers flailing
a leering wind. The pouring honey, Sartre's treacle that defies Category, are but notions;
the cells flesh lives in all praise distinction.

An unchanging sun continues to water
the ancient varieties: they flourish.
There is nothing new under the sun.
And nothing changed. Anguish is an ivy
on the still gaze of the able technicians.

From *Letters, Reports etc.*

8.ii.80

I think the eye is a round bead of stilled water
coloured by convenience. It is the plainer laws of optics
flatten my report of the live sights.
What you read is dull compendium, just report.
Each day we walk on God. Miles of tame and English clay
tremble when slapt by the casual foot.

Our sight is fed by straight lines. Beyond the flat miles,
more miles. Yesterday an old woman offered food. If my words
could burst into relief, I would own them.
(How straight these million sections of my mind! With
words as these I pray for a prayer that will unite
all the dry sticks of my domain.)

It is possible to see through a woman. I think
you once became my eye. You spilled light with a careless hand,
coloured the country with ambiguous stroke. Today
walking with my words—so many black particulars—
I search for a clearer eye.

Even as I search I know the eye, unruly, wild.

Poem for Francesca's Birthday

Thank God Francesca held on
While the world went round
Lived through the revolution
And without a sound.

Each night's a semi-circle
Made of dyed black rope
The trick is to hold on
Put the blame on Hope.

Thank God Francesca held on
Though her hands were sore
For last night Francesca
Became twenty-four.

Each night's a semi-circle
Made of dyed black rope
The trick is to hold on
Put the blame on Hope.

Thank God Francesca held on
While the world went round
Lived through the revolution
And without a sound.

Looking Up

Only stars, bright as you
and small like me, provide
a metaphor for our lives, but

the stars are not ours, are trite.

Only colourless sky is wide
like you, as empty as me
but it in turn denies

what's precise, so is lies.

Only jets can convey
your sure slow flight, the
noise of my shouts, but they

find passengers to fly, are unlike.

Only roofs can be close
like you, cramping as me
but their structure mistakes

the depth of our roots, becomes untruth.

Untitled

Need I say it? I despise sheep. They

bleat gently while others bloat, keep
pigs in office with their votes;

obey a dog who only knows
what his master's interests are;

unprotesting share a scraped pasture
with too many holy cows.

A respectable man, I despise what's slight.
Yet you call me fascist, poke my face with noises.

Song

Consider Lady that this your
Indelicate inconstancy
Has broken my heart into three.
One part for you and one for me
And a third for the little boy
Who lives down the street.

Consider too that you've made me
A veritable black sheep
And left me (in desperate ignominy)
Rediscovering my identity
Not in historical antecedents
But characters from the nursery.

One Way Conversation with Lady Love

With spreading night my heart grows darker,
in the absence of colour, blacker and blacker
and hides,
me, then, where will you stab?

do what you like, I shall always come back
for I'm the cripple who travels in a taxi cab.

Clerical Obituary

Fingering pale rubberbands—worms
On his desk, wood in his head,
Joseph Mackintosh reflects:
'All my devious life I've been
A worm in a wooden world

Edging toward a cleaner air.'
But the boots of God came down
Slapped Existence in a flash.
Junior Mackintosh survives
Working in the Underground.

Song : Saying Nothing

'Following Art's hallowed hex
I held the operatic phrase,
Set it down in notes and steps
But it was you I really chased'

—He sang, while his fiddling hands
Plucked the loose strings in his pocket.

Songs rehearsed on rubberbands
Establish love in a minute.

His song, however, is a tragic,
Turgid, wordy composition:
'The Emperor's Newest Music'
(Makes transparent his confusion!)

Lucinda, all bewildered, gazes—
Looks at the mysterious score:
Though she's flattered by her praises
Wishes she'd make sense of more.

Prefatory Verses

These, woman, are the twenty one lines
of the lined paper between which I sow
gouged eyeballs of the women I know.

            (Your fingers point
            at me.
            Tell me, tell me
            What do you see?)

And this the fruit. My uneven poems
fail to lift the symmetry of your view,
collapse, crying: look Dhiren, O this is yc

Poem

(For Lucinda Airy)

A bird once said to me:
'Steal the blue of her eye
Paint yourself a travelling sky.

Life's a single non-stop flight.'
And I replied: 'But surely he
Who winds my wings breathes her breath.
Lashes storms her pulse begets.
No. In these winds I cannot fly.'

It simply said:
'Your words are colours that give body to
Airy lies: to these
There is no reply':
Then flew overhead.

Autumn 1979, Poetry-London,
Apple Magazine,Vol. 1, No. 1.

Four Poses in a Relationship

'Whether he poses or is real, no cat
Bothers to say: the pose held is a stance'
—*Gunn*

1
Your street at night—black man
ruled by white eyes—is lit.
Thirteen lying lamps I
have clutched, woman, in the hope
they would lead me to your sky.

2
She always kept two sets of books:
The ones who loved her and the ones she loved.
Oh, the beautiful blackmarket of her leaping heart!
Take the cash (said Khayyam) and let the credit go!

3
On the second day he realized he had
Married a Church, in which women gathered.
In its crypt he spent the rest of his days
Looking for the one be knew.

4
Dearest, making sense of chosen words
is counting how many wings
hide the sky.
No. There's more profit in being blind
If it is the sky you want to see. . .
Talk to me.

Autumn 1979, Poetry-London,
Apple Magazine, Vol.1, No. 1.

Black Lines on a Blank Page

Struck at, all I see is flying hair.
The pale straw I thought I'd make my bed
Is angered, flaunts its full sail;
Her gold beats poems on my plain eyes.

The flaxen braids play out their dance.
I feel the white sheet of my ghost and know
(Recalling the fortunes of a flatter time)
Her refusals are strokes that publish weals.

Woman, you know your shaking head will sting
My stone face in several hundred places.
You will see Justice as you whip and thrash.
O let these lines sing my Innocence!

Autumn 1979, Poetry-London,
Apple Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 1.

Leap the Circle

'Yet if knew
What hoop should hold us staunch. . .'

Leap the circle lucky girl
Luck's a divine disturbance.
All the ponds of Richmond Park
God's disturbed by blowing winds.
Now no more will they reflect an
Image of you I can hold.
Leap the circle lucky girl
Leap the circle you're held in
Leap the circle lucky girl.

Sleeps the serpent in a curl
Leap the circle lucky girl.

Autumn 1979, Poetry-London,
Apple Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 1.

Tale of a Cruel Prince

But when he cried, perfect
like pearls scattered on sea floors
his tears fell. And he was un-
able to pick them, re-
store them. A poor man, he
prayed then. God forgave him.

Oxford Literary Journal, No.4.

Vanishment: Black (into Black)

Black is but a folded wing.
Each day is dense with night's clearness.
To sit through the evening hearing
the careless chatter of an hundred
thousand birds collapse to nothing!

Tired with this and that we rest
So as to lose ourselves in sleep.

And sleep? It is a breaking loose
Of all the black cats the head holds.

1980, The New Oxford Magazine,
No. 1, Trinity

The Shanty

Autumn. How browned ferns
stick to the lichen, disguise
each tree. How trees, grown
past imagining, tangle,
hide the house,
enclose me.

Morning here, the first thing I
did, junked the curtains. Today
fighting fern and tangle
I smash the panes, let
the rising mist
fill the front room.

9 September, 1988

Note: The Shanty is a little cottage out-house up on the hill in Landour, Mussourie where Dhiren had hoped to make a writer's nest for himself. This poem is the last one Dhiren ever wrote.

II. FICTION

Hints and Guesses

On any evening of the week stand with me on the balcony of our flat the hour when everything goes dark and you will see, on another balcony of another block of flats, a squat old man, standing, intent. For those who do not know him it is difficult to guess what it is he is attending to: the vulgar beauty of the sun dropping into the wrinkled grey sea, the darkening trees below, or the faint glow of orange that animates the white walls of the buildings. But none of these interest Sahni Saheb, he is too intent to be interested in anything so obvious: it is the hour of the crows, he is eavesdropping on their hoarse conversations.

I've heard Sahni Saheb's story so often now I think I can get all the details right—he never can, not at one telling, never. Each time he tells it, it comes out slightly different, a different suspicion predominates, ruins the fantastic balance God put into this story when he wrote it. . .

Sahni Saheb has two prominent dents on his forehead, evidence, he will tell you, of the knocks he has had to sustain in a long and troubled life. Don't get taken in by that whining, that note of self-pity. If you do, it is so easy to listen to his story paying attention to the wrong things, distracted by the syrupy indulgence with which he tells it.

Back in the fifties, before Sahni Saheb lived in Bombay, a *jyotshi* came to their house one Sunday morning just when Sahni Saheb and his wife Rama had finished breakfast. Sometimes he calls him a *jyotshi*, sometimes a pandit, it's possible that the visitor was both, but then, as you will see, Sahni Saheb's description may be unreliable. Rama wanted the *jyotshi* to read her hand, Sahni Saheb's own reaction was to chase him out of the house. Sahni Saheb relented, agreed to let the *jyotshi* read Rama's hand on the condition that they would pay him only if he got her past right. There was some difficulty in explaining to the *jyotshi* the point of this fairly simple test but eventually he seemed to understand and submit to the condition.

The *jyotshi* was a large man but his size alone could not account for the impression that he filled their large living room, 'presence' is the word Sahni Saheb uses to explain the mien of this man who appeared to him alternately ferocious and kind: *ek kshan bhayanak, ek kshan dayalu*. But these are the impressions that have remained: it is difficult to know exactly how Sahni Saheb first viewed the *jyotshi*. Somehow I doubt the *jyotshi* really scared him early on: Sahni Saheb, though not religious, came from an Arya Samaji family and they had little respect for wandering pandits and black-faced *jyotshis* with terrible aspect.

That indifference must have gone as soon as the *jyotshi* began to get the details of Rama's life right: the Lahore childhood, the hot winds that made her ill summer after summer, her craving for cold water, sherbets, jellies; jellies, that was a peculiar piece of information for a *jyotshi* to read in the confusing wrinkles of a palm: sometimes Sahni Saheb swears the *jyotshi* said jellies, at other times he doesn't mention the word at all.

The *jyotshi* got it all correct: Rama's father had known Sahni Saheb's, he had not been affluent, had spent his lifetime teaching. He had married Rama to a short man with little education but a large heart, a businessman who had moved from the Punjab to make his future in a trade that involved metal. Metal and oil. *Matti ka tel nahin, sarson ka tel.* (Not kerosene oil, mustard oil.)

Almost all: Rama had three sisters, not two, and though she had tried her hand at music she could hardly be called accomplished but these errors were nothing compared to what he had got right. Sahni Saheb now fixed the rate for having Rama's future read and was glad to find the man was not greedy. Of course, as anyone with an experience of *jyotshis* would tell you, that was a premature judgement, that once a *jyotshi* has you in his grip the fee for reading your hand is the smallest bit he shakes out of you. Since then, enough people have told Sahni Saheb precisely that but this piece of general knowledge, far from comforting him, upsets him even more.

Sahni Saheb was out of the room when the *jyotshi* began making the predictions. When he returned the *jyotshi* was all kindness. He wanted a word with Sahni Saheb. Ordinarily, Sahni Saheb would not have stood for this, would have insisted on the *jyotshi* speaking in front of Rama but he was touched by the look of kindness on the *jyotshi's* face and felt somehow indebted to the man. He motioned to Rama to leave the room.

The *jyotshi* directly took Sahni Saheb's right hand and began reading it. There seemed no reason why Sahni Saheb should stop him though he had no intention of paying for this extra service. Now the *jyotshi* looked grave, now terrible, needlessly dramatizing the occasion he delivered his prediction: Rama would soon become pregnant and would have a girl. But the girl would not be Sahni Saheb's child, *shaitaan ka baccha hoga* (it will be the child of Satan). What? *Haan, saaf likha hai unke haath pe ki beti aapki nahin, manushya ki nahin, shaitaan ki hogi.*

(Yes, it says clearly in your hand that the child is not yours, is not a human's—it is Satan's.) Sahni Saheb immediately called for his wife and asked the *jyotshi* to repeat what he had just said, called for her with a haste that suggested he felt somehow compromised having agreed to hear such a black prediction by himself.

Not only would the *shaitaan* father the child, the child would bring great grief to both Sahni Saheb and his wife. Rama would not live long. But Sahni Saheb had stopped listening to what the man had to say, he felt angry that the *jyotshi* should have succeeded in so insinuating himself between husband and wife. He tried to control himself, tried to think. Was it really this that had angered him? Or was it. . .

While Sahni Saheb was busy sorting out his own reactions the *jyotshi* came up with something different. There was an *upaya* available. It was a complicated one which he was not absolutely sure of, he would go to see his guru [*ghane jungle mein rahte hain pashu pakshiyon ke sangh* (who lives in the thick of the jungle with the birds and the beasts)] who would help him master the details of this complicated series of operations.

What would the *upaya* involve? Now the *jyotshi* grew calm, muttered a *shloka*, rattled off a few chants, then returned to Hindi. Ninety thousand rupees. Of course there were other things the parents would have to do. The girl would be called Maya, between the two of them they would have to repeat that name a hundred-and-twenty-five thousand times, there were certain *yagnas* that he would have to perform in their house. Why ninety thousand rupees? These were expensive *yagnas*, the materials that would be burnt included gold and the paste of ghee and powdered sapphires. It was a complicated business, he would explain the details as he went along. What would the *upaya* achieve? The *upaya* would expel the *shatru*, the *shaitaan* who had captured Rama's womb. Expel the father from the womb? Yes, many different forces compete for the same authority: Sahni Saheb was competing with the *shaitaan*, the *jyotshi's upaya* would bring victory to Sahni Saheb. Would it be the same girl who would be born as a result of the *upaya* or would it be a different girl? The calm left the *jyotshi's* dark face, the furrows returned to his broad forehead. They were clearly incredulous and did not believe what he had said, there was no use going on with them, it was not money he was here for, he didn't need any. He pointed to his *potli*, picked it up and walked out.

Had this happened to someone else they might have laughed. Rama looked upset. If only they had not insisted he tell them of Rama's childhood. Jelly.The *shaitaan*. It was weird.

A few hours later all kinds of doubts began to rise, attempting to overturn the solid facts of the *jyotshi's* achievement. Could the *jyotshi* read minds? Could someone have told him of Rama's background? Why ninety thousand rupees? Sahni Saheb had a suspicion which Rama found difficult to countenance, but it was a suspicion one could not dismiss; even Rama thought as much. In this Vidharba town there was another Punjabi, a business rival of Sahni Saheb's and a distant relation of Rama's not really a relation, merely a *bhaisaheb*. Sahni Saheb had never trusted Shashi *bhaisaheb*, they were both angling for the same agency and to part with ninety thousand at this stage would leave Sahni Saheb quite broke, hardly in a position to acquire the agency. But if that was the case why would Shashi *bhaisaheb* get those details about the sisters wrong? If he had set the *jyotshi* on Sahni Saheb, he could easily have told him that Rama was hardly musical. Of course this could have been done deliberately but Sahni Saheb wished the *jyotshi* had not made those mistakes.

Rama, they soon learnt, was pregnant. Sahni Saheb decided to speak to Shashi *bhaisaheb*, to clear this nonsense. If *bhaisaheb* showed the slightest hesitation when confronted with this business Sahni Saheb would know where they stood. Rama grew nervous. It was typical of Sahni Saheb to go about accusing people, *bhaisaheb* was connected with her family, he would be offended. Worse, he would tell her parents all about this. It was important to retain his confidence, to prise the information without offending him, without disturbing anything. One couldn't let a *jyotshi's* wild talk break old ties.

There was good news for Sahni Saheb when he got home that evening. He had been right in his suspicion: Shashi *bhaisaheb* had set up the *jyotshi*, it was his idea of a practical joke, nothing serious.He had meant to come around and see their reaction before letting on but all of a sudden, business had taken him to Akola. Shashi *bhaisaheb* had reckoned that Sahni Saheb would not be taken in; to save Sahni Saheb's face Rama had pretended that Sahni Saheb had seen through the ruse from the very beginning, that it was only she who had feared the *jyotshi's* prediction.

When the *jyotshi* finally came round with his *upaya* Sahni Saheb got rid of him quick enough. '*Agar shaitaan mujhe beti denewala hai to main inkaar kaise karoon! Bahut apmaan hoga shaitaan ka.*' (If Satan wants to give me a daughter how can I refuse him? It would be an insult.) The *jyotshi* had not expected such robust jokes. He went away.

Rama died in childbirth, the baby was a slight, sickly girl with a harelip. Had Rama lived I feel sure Sahni Saheb would not have called the girl Maya; in the event, he did. When she was six months old Sahni Saheb took her to Bombay to be operated upon. It was in Bombay that he first told his story to a friend. Perhaps he shouldn't have for the story, once out, returned to trouble him.

The friend's point was simple. How could Sahni Saheb be so sure that Shashi *bhaisaheb* had spoken the truth to Ramaji? It had been very foolish of Sahni Saheb to let Ramaji speak to Shashi *bhaisaheb* alone. It was possible that the *jyotshi* was genuine. *Upayas* were often expensive, ninety thousand was nothing compared to the cost of some of the *upayas* he had personally supervised in Bombay. For if the *jyotshi* had been genuine Ramaji had unwittingly given Shashi *bhaisaheb* an excellent opportunity to ruin Sahni Saheb. Hadn't people said that Shashi *bhaisaheb's* rivalry went beyond business? Sahni Saheb had been given a warning by the *jyotshi*; Shashi *bhaisaheb*, by inventing the story about the practical joke, had distracted them fatally. After all, if it was a practical joke how could the *jyotshi* have known about the pregnancy and how could he have predicted that Ramaji would die soon? *Aapko bhaisaheb ne yoon chakma diya hai, aap to bilkul kaam ke na rahe.* (*Bhaisaheb* has decieved you; now you have nothing left.)

Sahni Saheb was properly confused. The more Sahni Saheb thought of what his friend had said the more it seemed possible, the more it seemed to account for the facts. No, it wasn't the harelip, he kept saying to himself, it wasn't the harelip that made him suspicious, it was something else, he couldn't put his finger on it, but it was there.

Shashi *bhaisaheb* was at the station to receive them. After that, he hardly seemed to leave them. He'd turn up every evening. So warm. So close. Was it not proof of his sincerity? Or was it that having ruined Sahni Saheb he now wished to observe his victim's daily ordeal?

Sahni Saheb decided to return that warmth, to become a proper friend. After all, it was only by getting closer to Shashi *bhaisaheb* that he could ever learn the truth of what had transpired. As for Maya, he had decided before she had been born that he would treat her as if nothing had happened, as if the *jyotshi* had never entered their lives. Most of the time he kept to his resolve. But doubts are like worms and can creep beneath the heaviest of stones. When she cried, how could he be *sure* who it was crying. Some nights he would sit by her, watching her cry, doing nothing to pacify her, looking for signs.

Some years later, Maya fell violently ill, kept coughing and vomiting blood. No medicine seemed to help her. Sahni Saheb's old fears were revived by the unnatural symptoms. After two anxious nights he decided to tackle Shashi *bhaisaheb*.

Were it not for the extreme danger Maya was in, it is doubtful Shashi *bhaisaheb* would have spoken. As it was, he was extremely reluctant but Sahni Saheb's wild insistence finally wore him down. What exactly had he said to the *jyotshi*? How much of it was a joke? Shashi *bhaisaheb* merely shook his head.

This is what Shashi *bhaisaheb* finally said to him: When she was eighteen, a year before her parents had her married off, Rama had spent a holiday with Shashi *bhaisaheb's* family in Amritsar. It was during this vacation that Rama had fallen in love with him and—though Shashi *bhaisaheb* was reluctant to spell this out—had found her love reciprocated. The word Shashi *bhaisaheb* used was 'intimate'. When Shashi *bhaisaheb* moved to Nagpur, Rama was twenty-four and childless. She had tried to renew their intimacy. Convinced she was suffering from a straightforward case of boredom he had refused to play along with her.

Galat mat samjhiye, bacchi thi woh: (Don't misunderstand, she was only a child) one afternoon Rama had telephoned him asking him to come over immediately. He thought he had a fair idea what it was all about. Instead she told him about the *jyotshi*. She seemed particularly excited, the *jyotshi* had got so many details of her childhood correct, it was as if he had recognized her life, given it shape. Then she told him the *jyotshi* had predicted to her, while Sahni Saheb was out of the room, how she would bear Shashi *bhaisaheb*'s child, the child of a fair tall man whose name began with the letter *sh*. The *jyotshi* then gave her a nasty scare: he had called aside Sahni Saheb and spoken to him. What had he said? Luckily it was nothing much. For when she returned to the room the *jyotshi* was busy feeding Sahni Saheb some elaborate story of how she would bear the child of the *shaitaan*. Sahni Saheb might be clever at business but in such matters he was a real fool. He had started taking seriously what the *jyotshi* had said and now, days later, he somehow seemed to feel Shashi *bhaisaheb* was behind it all.

In the *jyotshi's* prediction she had seen divine approval: now she could do what she always wanted: have Shashi *bhaisaheb*'s child; there would be nothing wrong in that. Shashi *bhaisaheb* saw things differently: he had seen through the *jyotshi* straight away. By letting Rama know that he was aware of her fondness for Shashi *bhaisaheb* (a piece of information quite easily picked up from the servants) the *jyotshi* would try to blackmail her into silence, while the *jyotshi* would try to squeeze Sahni Saheb for as much as he could. What could Shashi *bhaisaheb* do? To talk things over with Sahni Saheb seemed impossible: too much had been hidden from Sahni Saheb in the past, it would have to remain hidden. And Rama, he knew, was in no mood to share his view of the *jyotshi*. So he went along with the suggestion that he had set up the *jyotshi*, told him about Rama's background. Why had he done that, she demanded? He had faltered for a reply, it was a joke, he had said, trying to sound convincing. He could see no harm in this: after all, he was sure the *jyotshi* was a fraud. He must have been a fraud, to Rama he had said that the child would be his, Shashi *bhaisaheb*'s, but it was not: to Sahni Saheb he had said the child would be the *shaitaan's* but Maya was a normal child.

Sahni Saheb heard all this without interruption. At the end he asked only one question: that day when she had told him about the *jyotshi* had Rama said she was pregnant? Shashi *bhaisaheb* shook his head, looked genuinely surprised.

If you have managed to keep track of all the twists you will appreciate how this account of Shashi *bhaisaheb's* complicated Sahni Saheb's life. His first impulse was to believe Shashi *bhaisaheb*. His old fears seems justified: the *jyotshi* had probably been right but worse still, Rama.... Could he bring himself to believe that Rama had deceived him so? Could this not be another torment Shashi *bhaisaheb* had devised for him: having made Sahni Saheb doubt daughter, friend and *jyotshi* would he now make Sahni Saheb doubt his wife?

Once he had convinced himself that Shashi *bhaisaheb* was up to no good, doubt pulled Sahni Saheb's mind both ways. One way Rama was vindicated, the dead woman was in the clear. But then, what if there was something to what Shashi *bhaisaheb* had said? Perhaps he had been afraid to tell all and he had invented this story. But if he had wanted to lie, why had he told Sahni Saheb so much? Could he have thought Sahni Saheb would not suspect the rest, content that he had learnt the truth? What was *bhaisaheb's* real interest in staying so close to the family? To see his daughter every day? It was difficult to say, the man had appeared so sincere.

Soon after Maya recovered, 'miraculously' the doctor had said, Sahni Saheb sold his business and moved to Bombay, at first renting a place in King's Circle, then finally buying a flat on Pali Hill. The doubts receded, he was glad there were no more clues to the truth. Maya prospered. Every December, Shashi *bhaisaheb* would come down to spend the month with them.

Eight years ago Maya had announced to her father that she was going to marry. Sahni Saheb had prepared himself for this; what he had not reckoned on was the husband Maya had chosen for herself: Shashi *bhaisaheb.*

It was clear to Sahni Saheb that she was making a mistake. But how could he demonstrate this to Maya? Did he dare pull at the past? Could he suggest to her that Shashi *bhaisaheb* was really her father? He could hardly believe that himself, how could he prove it to Maya? Yet, father or no father, Shashi *bhaisaheb* was up to mischief. How could Sahni Saheb communicate his fears to Maya?

Sahni Saheb felt he too had been blackmailed into silence. He had brought up Maya without ever telling her what the *jyotshi* had said, without ever telling her that a *jyotshi* had read her mother's hand; to do so now would be disastrous. Yet without bringing in the *jyotshi* it was impossible to show up Shashi *bhaisaheb.*

Sahni Saheb decided to oppose Maya's decision on traditional grounds: Shashi *bhaisaheb* was too old for her, he said. Maya laughed this objection away.

Could Sahni Saheb risk a showdown, the stubborn father refusing to bless the wedding? Then Shashi *bhaisaheb* was sure to tell Maya about the *jyotshi*, to acquaint her with her father's frequent doubts about her identity. She would never trust her father again.

Sahni Saheb accepted the situation. The three met amicably enough and fixed a date. Maya and Shashi *bhaisaheb* would be married at home. It was a simple ceremony, they would invite six friends, no more.

Shashi *bhaisaheb* had promised to bring the pandit. Maya began to panic when Shashi *bhaisaheb* and the pandit did not arrive on time, Sahni Saheb busied himself in the kitchen supervising dinner.

The *havan* began some twenty minutes late. Sahni Saheb took his place by the couple, then started. The pandit Shashi *bhaisaheb* had brought along was the *jyotshi*. Now fierce, now kind.

Sahni Saheb interrupted the ceremony demanding to know why this old tormentor was here. But the pandit looked puzzled, denied he had ever met Sahni Saheb and continued with his ceremony. Maya was irritated: what was her father going on about?

Shashi and Maya now live in Nagpur, Sahni Saheb lives by himself in his flat in the building across the road from us. In the evenings he stands on his balcony while around him flapping crows thicken the air with their shouts. He is busy distinguishing each loud cry. Occasionally he seems to understand what one crow has said to the others, he cranes his neck to hear what they have understood. The crows reply to one another: Sahni Saheb fails to comprehend the retort, settles back to try catch the drift of another conversation. The light orange glow deepens to violet, the crows are like his thoughts, raucous black birds that send each other flying in the hour of confusion before they finally fold their wings leaving the sky dark.

Bombay
7–21 March, 1985

Mr Iyer

In the May of 1972, in response to an advertisement in the *Times of India*, Padmanabha Natesha Iyer applied for the post of Manager at one of the newer Co-operative Housing Societies on Pali Hill. After three weeks he received a cyclostyled letter on the Society's letterhead informing him he had been selected for an interview: 11.15, Sunday, the fifth of June. Mr Iyer did not feel elated at the news; having worked in a similar post for the last eight years he knew only too well that all applicants whose qualifications met the list of Essential Qualifications were interviewed for such a job, that somehow the Members of the Committee invariably found interviewing interesting.

The post was a part-time one, so was Mr Iyer's present post. He would have to divide his energies. On the fifth, however, such division became impossible. The secretary of the Parbat Parkash Committee, Mr Jaisinghania, was to leave for Indore on the eighth, so the monthly meeting of the Managing Committee was brought forward to the fifth. As Manager Mr Iyer was required to attend. Mr Iyer hummed and Mr Iyer hawed. But at length, as was expected, Mr Iyer attended. Opening the Record of Minutes, among his Tamil prayers, he could be heard mumbling something about a bird in hand.

As yet, only three of the eight members had lolled in. As the Society's office could barely accommodate Mr Iyer and his desk, meetings were held at one of the member's flats, usually Mr Jaisinghania's. The Committee occupied the living room, Mrs Jaisinghania retreated to the kitchen, their son spied from the passage. Mrs J came in, carrying the tray bearing coffee. Mr Iyer rose in a slightly uncomfortable ritual, took the tray from her before she crossed the dining table to the living room area, then handed round the individual coffee cups. The son brought in two bowls of eatables. Amid the showcased collections of disparate objects that was the living room, the members appeared real. At one-thirty they broke for lunch.

Large and round in bland but wholesome homespun, Mr Iyer looked a tame religious elephant. He stood in the open doorway of Flat 2A and coughed his request to use the phone. Three young girls playing in the stairway — resident's daughters all — stopped their game to tease him.

'Iyer is a li-ar, Iyer is a li-ar'

The servant's daughter who accompanied them stared, giggling, awed. Mr Iyer merely smiled.

By this time he was let in 2A. With a practised nervousness he rolled towards the telephone. A pudgy finger seemed to savour each separate dialing motion. 'Alankar Co-operative Housing Society? . . .eyess Sir. Mr P.N. Iyer, Sir. The interview, Sir. . . Sorry Sir. . .7.30 Sir. Yes Sir. Thank you Sir. Sorry Sir.'

At seven that evening he spilled out of the 211 at the bus-stop on the foot of Pali Hill.

Bombay has but two hills. Today Mr Iyer will stand on one of them. At a local mirror he preens himself. Among the faces that bob up and down the betel-stained glass, he is the serious fat man adjusting the thick black plastic of his spectacle frame. And now he moved: leisured self-important strides push him up the green, tarred, expensive hill. It is the Progress of the Devotee.

The uniformed watchman at the Alankar gate did not ask him what his business was. Scanning the building's fourteen floors with an awkward rotation of his stubby neck, Mr Iyer pulled from his pocket a neatly folded piece of paper. In an agitated whisper his blunt lips quickly rehearsed the introductory speech. His body stiffened; each bureaucratic phrase affected his loose limbs: the gait altered. On the phone Mr Mehta had spoken English. Punjabi, Parsi, or Gujarati? The accent was not distinctive: an education had made it flat. The fourteenth floor.

At heights as these the wind's a leveller. In the hall there were two lifts: a notice announced the manually operated one was for servants. Unhesitatingly, Mr Iyer flapped his sandals into the automatic.

Had he known Mr Mehta would be standing outside the lifts on the fourteenth floor he might not have done so. But Mr Mehta hardly seemed to notice. He looked askance at the stranger. Mr Iyer moved to the West flat. Mr Mehta connected.

'So you're Mr. . .'

'Iyer, Sir.'

'Come in.'

Just that. Having crossed the black marble threshold, as a routine action Mr Iyer removed his sandals and arranged them in a vacant corner. Bending was difficult, and rising more so. From across the passage that linked the foyer to the living room all Mrs Mehta saw was a solid block, resembling more a pillar than a posterior.

Nehru spanned three Indias—Brahmin, Muslim and English. When Nehru died Mrs Mehta had flown to Delhi for the funeral. Though in the end she did not join the procession that way she had felt closer. Rashmi Mehta was then thirty-two, and beautiful. Mrs Mehta was still beautiful. Regal in her pious cotton, for most of the interview she sat in the living room: buttons or knitting, what it was he couldn't be sure, certainly it was one or the other. Then the interview ended and Mr Iyer left.

At dinner they discussed Mr Iyer. When Mr Mehta wondered if he was really suitable, Mrs Mehta was final. 'But dear, he must get the job. Didn't you see him take off his shoes before coming in?'

Mr Iyer got the job. God's servants are efficient accomplices. They aid his plans: he ensures prosperity. The world is too much involved with itself to notice the conspiracy.

Keynote
May, 1982

Mother's Tribute

Dhiren Remembered

> *Varameko gunī putro, na ça murkhaśatanyapi*
> *Ekasçandra stamo hanti, na ça taragaŋo api ça*
>
> (It is better to have one virtuous son, than a hundred unworthy ones. A single moon dispels darkness; not a collection of many stars.)
>
> —Sanskrit Proverb

Dhiren was born in Tokyo in 1957. One day prior to my discharge from the hospital the Japanese nurse came into my room and asked 'Mrs Bhagat what name baby?' We had not decided or even thought of a name yet. 'No name baby, sorry, no can baby go home,' said she quite candidly. I panicked for I did want to take the baby home with me. We both set to the task of thinking of a name very quickly. My husband suggested 'Dhiren' and I promptly settled for it. Now names have a meaning and this is very important to me. However, Dhiren being a very uncommon name for a long time I had the false notion that it meant 'the patient one', being somewhat similar to the word *dhiraj* (patience) in sound. As Dhiren grew up, we saw him so impatient at times, always hurrying and scurrying, always rushing to places, getting late for everything and in a state of seeming confusion. 'Where on earth did you get his name from?' I asked his father more than once, adding that Dhiren was far from patient. Later however, reading the Upanishads, I came across the word *'Dhira'* from which Dhiren is derived. *Dhira* means the wise one and indicates a combination of intelligence and courage which make for the highest character. When the tributes started coming in for Dhiren, I felt that he had a courage of conviction far beyond his years and that his name was befitting indeed.

One of the earliest significant memories of Dhiren dates back to our days in Tokyo. Dhiren was less than a year-and-a-half old. He had been trained to bring the newspaper from the front door every morning for his father. He was doing his job reasonably well. Then one day, instead of handing over the newspaper to his father, he lay sprawled on our big bed with his tiny outstretched hands holding the *Japan Times*, pretending to read it. His father was so pleased and amused that he quickly clicked his camera. Little did I know then that this was his first connection with the newspaper world to which he belonged so much at the time of his passing away.

Then there is another delightful memory of that period. We had gone for a short visit to Copenhagen. Being the month of January it was very cold and there was a lot of snow around. One day, little Dhiren, exactly one-and-a-half years old, clad in a dark snow-suit (which provided an attractive contrast to the snow) walked and walked with us, enjoying various sites, till he could wobble on the snow no more. That evening, having put Dhiren to bed, we both went to an exclusive dining place. There, we were ushered in with the words, 'Madame, allow me to compliment you.' Ignoring my husband's forbidding glance the manager carried on, 'You have the most beautiful boy in Copenhagen. I saw him with you feeding pigeons at the Town Square in the morning.' This compliment, in a place where we were total strangers, flattered a mother's pride, and has remained close to my heart always; now even more.

Dhiren's first exposure to the outside world, was when he attended a nursery school in London. After his return from the nursery, we both would pack a picnic basket and carry it to the Gunnersbury Park, where we would admire the great big trees and the great big bushes, the flower beds and the fresh green grass. Sometimes, we would feed the ducks and sometimes just sit idly on a bench talking of this and that. This was, as I recall, Dhiren's first love of nature shared so happily with me. This habit continued. Each year, Dhiren would accompany me to Kasauli in the hills, where my parents lived. Together, we would explore the roads—sometimes going off the beaten track to saunter in the woods. Dhiren would go stomping on the earth covered with pine needles, with his tiny boots, thinking he was enhancing the fragrance of the woods with the delicate scent of pine oil. We walked together in the mountains of India, South Australia, Switzerland, and in the parks of London, Paris and Prague. Nature exhilarated us both creating a beautiful bond between us.

We also shared an interest in poetry. Dhiren, at an early age, showed a fascination for words and enjoyed playing with them. Once, when he was five years old, we asked him to go and see what the cook was doing. With childish excitement he reported, 'Chiman is sitting with a mountain of rice and a river of curry.' This was Dhiren. His many such expressions are called, 'Gems of Dhiren Bhagat' by his father.

Dhiren was around eight years old. We lived in Juhu those days. His father was working a night shift at the airport. Dhiren crept into my bed and asked me what I was planning to read that night. I answered it would be Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He badgered me to read it out aloud promising not to interrupt and ask for explanations. On another occasion he took me aback by the question, 'Ma, how do you write poetry?' Those were days when I devoted a great deal of my time to reading poetry and some of it to writing as well. Nevertheless, I found it difficult to answer the question, but Dhiren had to have an answer for everything. I remember telling him 'I find myself in a different mood sometimes, not quite with things, going inwards as it were. Then suddenly, I sit with a pen and paper and write down my feelings in a language which has form and style that pleases me.' Dhiren listened to this very carefully but made no comment. A few days later on a very stormy night, when the monsoon rain was lashing the window panes causing an occasional coconut frond to fall on the tiled roof with a great big thud, I went round the house to make sure that all doors and windows were properly shut. I returned to my bedroom to find little Dhiren in my bed again. His father was working at night and I assumed that Dhiren was feeling frightened. However, he surprised me by saying, 'No, I am not frightened. I know you are going to write some poetry tonight and I want to see how you do it.' That night with Dhiren cuddled next to me, I remember having written :

'This madness of the storm
Borrow it not my heart.
Do not let stir, unleash or unfurl
Tamed stilled desires. . .'

The poem went on. . . Dhiren read the finished product and seemed to like it. He then made a simple declaration, 'I am going to write poetry.' He was just eight then.

Apart from our love of nature and poetry, we shared something else—something that is profoundly sacred. In London, where we had gone to attend a Memorial Meeting for Dhiren a friend of his came from Rome for the same purpose. She drove straight from the airport to where we were and made a gushing statement, 'Mrs Bhagat, Dhiren was very close to you. He was very close to God and this he shared with you.' True indeed, for this was the best thing we shared. Dhiren was never surrounded by symbols, but he had conviction and steadfastness of heart in abundant measure. On an operational level Dhiren seemed to accept and even be involved with worldly phenomena—but on the spiritual level, he was seen to renounce things. This was not without a deeper motive, or else it would have been a futile exercise. The *shastras* (scriptures) advocate subjugation of the senses. One of the central tenets of the Upanishads is, *'Tena tyaktena bhunjithah'* which means 'enjoy life through renunciation'. We all have desires. If we give in to them, more desires are born as a result. The cycle continues and we end up slaves to our desires. On the other hand, if, by the strength of our will and character, we conquer these desires, they get transmuted into energy which becomes available to us for better use, that is spiritual uplift. His being a complete teetotaller—not having any alcohol ever, no tobacco, no tea or coffee even—was a part of this philosophy. The climax was reached when he arrived from Mussoorie after observing an eight-day fast, living only on water. Lying in my hospital bed as I then was, I naturally grew alarmed. Dhiren said, 'Take a good look at me Ma; then tell me honestly if you think I am any the worse for it.' Seeing his eyes shining, his cheeks glowing and, of course, an impish, beaming smile, I was somewhat disarmed. Then I asked, 'Are you trying to become a little Mahatma?' 'No harm trying,' was the simple reply.

Dhiren was compassionate towards all creatures. He gave up eating non-vegetarian food, quite suddently in 1975, when we were in London, although he was not brought up as a vegetarian. He used to say, 'I am a vegetarian for aesthetic, hygienic and humanitarian reasons.'

Apart from his Upanishadic detachment he was imbued with a great deal of *sraddha*. *Sraddha*, is an attitude of the mind, and can be described as the spirit of truth or perhaps faith and reverence, although there is no exact equivalent of this word in English. The best I have come across is Swami Vivekananda's interpretation in his 'Reply to the Address of Welcome at Calcutta' (*Complete Works*, Vol. III, English Edition, p 319-320)

> 'I would not translate this word *sraddha* to you, it would be a mistake, and much depends on it. . . What makes the difference between man and man is the difference in this *sraddha* and nothing else. What makes one man great and another weak and low is this *sraddha*. My Master used to say, he who thinks himself weak will become weak and this is true. This *sraddha must* enter into you.'

In *Bhagwad Gita* (xvii:3) Lord Krishna says, 'Man verily is what his *sraddha* is'.

It is this quality more than anything else that earned Dhiren my respect.

Shortly after Dhiren returned from Oxford he attended an eleven-day course in *'Vippashna'* at Igatpuri in the Nasik District. *Vippashna* is a

Buddhist technique of meditation aimed at making you see things as they really are. Dhiren said he had spent most of his time in meditation living austerely. He returned with considerable weight loss, but fresh as a lark. Sadly, he did not continue this practice of meditation although he intended to get back to it.

Dhiren shared different interests with his father. First of all he enjoyed the many jokes his father always had up his sleeve. At the age of five he wrote a composition for his school, 'My father is a very funny man. He has a joke for every occasion. He makes us laugh all the time.' Then there was a keen interest in politics. In a letter sharing our grief, his godfather, Paul Grand wrote to us from New York: 'As I watched him in recent years, I often thought of the role Viri's (his father's) interest in world affairs had to have had on Riri's (Dhiren's) choice of a career, though he may not have fully realized it yet.' In April 1987, subsequent to his becoming the South-East Asia correspondent for the *Observer* (London), Dhiren moved to Delhi in order to be at the centre of political activity. He then felt the need for some 'worldly wisdom', for which he tapped his willing father: matters relating to income tax, insurance, investments, land prices and the like became frequent topics of discussion, but he said to me, 'Can you believe it, Ma? I am becoming a worldly man but I don't like it. I am sure I could write better if I did not have to worry about bills and payments.'

Dhiren was a caring son. Through the eleven years of my difficult illness, he was a constant support to both of us, injecting courage and optimism into the most dismal situation. I recall lines written by a close friend of his in his condolence message to us, 'After spending a couple of hours with Dhiren the world always seemed a lighter, brighter, more extraordinary place.' Last May, he came to New York to look after me following my two operations there. He took good care of me, in his own absent-minded way of course. The gentle understanding and feeling tone behind every little gesture when I was so hopelessly helpless will remain etched in my heart forever. While I was recuperating he offered me distraction from pain by showing me old classics—*Wuthering Heights, Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre, How Green Was My Valley* —on the video. We saw them together and this togetherness delighted me and perhaps even aided my recovery. After Dhiren left I did not care to see any more films.

Dhiren was generous of heart and hand, willing to help spontaneously. He did not attach much importance to money although he seemed to need it most of the time. It he had it he would happily spend on others; if not he would happily borrow it. A friend of his told me that he would give himself so completely to his friends. His generosity in the way of lavish presents was at times too much for me. On such occasions he called me a poor receiver and embarrassed me. He brought to me a lot of devotional music during the long periods spent in the confinement of home or quite often just one room. The last cassette taped for me with ineffable joy and excitement in Memphis was Subbalaxmi's *'Ram Nam'*. Could he have left me anything more precious? I quote here lines from a condolence message sent by Manek Davar, a friend in Tokyo, 'We met Riri thrice—each time he charmed us—each time I told myself, here is a son for all parents to delight in.' He couldn't have spoken a truer word. Dhiren's best friend in London wrote, 'I always knew he was wonderful but it is very nice to know that so many others did so too.'

Towards the end particularly, Dhiren was full of plans. He was hurrying to sort out most aspects of his life, unknowingly racing against time. It was agreed that his beloved cottage 'The Shanty' in Mussoorie where he hoped to devote a lot of time to writing in future, would now be allotted in his name. This made him very happy. He planned to move shortly to the late Ex-President Zakir Hussain's bungalow in Delhi, which had been kindly offered to him by the Begum's family. He was insistent that we should come and live with him and sit out on the lawns in the evenings. 'Bombay is no place to live in after retirement.' He was keen to buy a plot of land to build a bungalow in Delhi. His father put down money for this just three weeks before the accident. After that he was busy raising money for some more land. 'What for Dhiren?' 'When my children are ready for their Oxbridge education, prices will have escalated and it will come in handy,' was the reply. He was also serious about settling down to pour his soul as it were, into his book on the Punjab for Penguin India, for which he had done research very painstakingly. He also had elaborate travel plans—South Africa, Japan and a re-visit to Pakistan as Benazir Bhutto had agreed to grant him an interview. The world intoxicated Dhiren. He drank life to the lees and till the very end enjoyed every moment of it. It must also be added here that God in His magnanimity gave him success in all his ventures, particularly towards the end. On the very last day, he thumped his friend's shoulder and said, *'Mian man jayo; mein to bazi jeet gaya.'* (Friend, you have to agree—I've won the game.) In this state of happy elation—almost euphoric— Dhiren left this world. Having won the game, need one continue?

We last saw him on 6 November, a day before he left for Pakistan. He used to come home to Bombay frequently even if it was for a night only. As usual, he was getting late for his Delhi flight. I was informed that he was standing with folded hands before his *Ganpatijee* (the elephant god) admiring him. When he finally set out I gave him the usual *vibhuti tikka* (sacred ash mark on the forehead) with the usual blessings, *'Shantanukul pavanashcha, sivashcha pantha'* (May the winds be favourable and your path auspicious). With this we parted.

He was returning home to Bombay on the 24th evening, when all his ephemeral dreams and all his worldly plans were nipped in the bud at Willingdon Crescent—the site of the tragic accident in New Delhi. If the Almighty had offered him the most precious He has, instead of this world, Dhiren's answer I think, would have been somewhat on the lines of the famous Urdu poet, Iqbal:

> *'Bage bahisht se diya tha hukmen safar kywon?*
> *Kare-jehan daraz hai, ab mera intezar kar.'*
> (Having banished me from your Paradise
> Now you have to wait.
> I have commitments in your world
> Vast and great.)

Dhiren was not given the choice, nor we who loved him, the opportunity. Opportunity for *'dava'* and *'dua'* (medicine and prayer). He was snatched away so suddenly from our midst, but only the mortal body was gone; the spirit lives on.

At a memorial meeting held for Dhiren in Bombay, two speakers said the following:

Mr M.V. Kamath said that about a month or so before his fatal accident, Dhiren had gone to him, picked up a book written by him named *'The Philosophy of Death and Dying'* and asked 'What on earth made you write this book?' They discussed the book. Dhiren asked, 'Have you found out what death means?' He then asked for a copy of the book, which was promised to him on his next visit, but before that he had himself crossed the barrier between life and death. When Mr Kamath heard of the accident Dhiren's voice came alive, 'Have you found out what death is about?'

The other speaker, Mr R.K. Karanjia said that around the same period, Dhiren had gone to him wanting to discuss how yoga is related to death. Mr Karanjia quoted Shakespeare—

> So shall thou feel on death, that feeds on men,
> And death once dead, there's no more dying then.

He explained that these lines indicate the immortality of the spirit. A yogi who lives in spirit defies death. He dies daily and as a result he conquers death and passes from life to death in an ordinary way, without any great trauma or drama.

What prompted this interest in death. Was it a coincidence or a premonition? This question will never be answered.

In the end I quote the last lines from a poem of mine which were Dhiren's favourite:

> When all men lie in slumber deep
> I lie awake and feel—
> And feel; (unable to sleep)
> The scent of woods is in my breath,
> The warmth of fire is in my flesh
> The romance of the whole world is in me
> I cannot sleep—I cannot sleep

And I believe that he is neither asleep nor dead. A person like Dhiren can never die.

'Ma'
31 March, 1989

This article was written exclusively for this book by Dhiren's mother.

Glossary

Akal Takht	highest seat of religious authority of the Sikhs
amavas	the last day of the dark half of the lunar month
amrita	nectar
antim ardas	final prayer
arati	the ritual performed by moving a lamp or camphor flame around an idol or holy person
ashauj	ritual period of mourning observed on death of a family-member
ashleel	impure
baba	an elderly or holy man
bania	tradesman, merchant
bayaan	statement
Bhagwan bhes	religious saffron attire
bhaisaheb	a respectful term of address, meaning brother
bhakt	devotee
bhakti	devotion
bibi	a respectful term of address for a lady
Bole so Nihal	clarion-call of the Sikhs
brahmacharya	celibacy, chastity
chamchagiri	sycophancy
chattri	canopy
choodidaar	tight-fitting pyjamas
darpok	coward
dava	medicine
devasthanam	the abode of the Gods, a temple
dhaba	roadside eating place
dua	prayer
dubki	dip
Durga (incarnate)	an embodiment of the goddess of power
ghati	a mildly derogatory term used for hill-folk
ghatia lafda	fracas
grihan	eclipse
haldi	turmeric
Haryanvi	hailing from Haryana
havan	a sacrificial fire
jaloos	procession
jalsa	a meeting; festivity; entertainment
jaree-bootee	herbs
jharoo	broom

Jupji	morning prayer of the Sikhs
jyotshi	astrologer
kada parshad	sacred food of the Sikhs
kala	art
Kesari Pagri	saffron turban
khadi	hand-spun and woven cloth
kirtan	devotional song
kriya	postures; actions
kumbha	pot
lokeshtna	worldly desires
madrsa	school
Mahavir Jayanti	birthday of Lord Mahavir, founder of Jainism
maitri karar	marriage by contract
maiya	mother
mamaji	maternal-uncle
mandiya-ragi	a cereal
mela	fair
moomphaliwala	peanut-seller
mukti, moksha	salvation
naman	an invocation to Lord Ganesh
neem	margosa
Nishaan, Vidhan, Pradhan	flag, state-assembly, chief
paap	sin
padmasana	a posture in yoga
padnamashkar	obeisance made by touching someone's feet
padyatra	journey undertaken on foot
parikrama	outer corridor of a temple
phul	ashes or mortal remains after cremation
potli	bundle
pracharam	maximum
pushpavatika	flower-garden
raddiwala	one who buys scrap
rajyogi	one who practises Rajyoga—a system of yoga
sala	brother-in-law; a derogatory term
samjhauta	accord, agreement
sant-sipahi	soldier-saint
sanstha	organization
shahenshah	emperor
shaitan	devil
shatru	enemy
shraddha	faith
shikara	steeple of a temple
snan	bath
takiya-kalaam	pet-phrase
tapas	meditation
toshakhana	treasury, store-room of precious gifts
upaya	remedy, solution
yatri	traveller
zindabad	long-live

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